

# *Interzone*

Imaginative Fiction M. John Harrison Richard Cowper John Crowley and others



**MORE PAGES**

# Interzone

## EDITORIAL

On the cover of this issue St John Child's Delphic robot announces the fifth appearance of *Interzone*, the magazine that brings you news from that peculiar district between past and future, disputed territory known as the present. This number features reports of alien invasion from Scott Bradfield and of mythic recurrence from Richard Cowper. In the Seventh Saint Bar and Grill John Crowley speculates on the possibility of science fiction. M. John Harrison writes of death in Viriconium, John Shirley of life under the floorboards. Illustrations include Edwin Dorff's "Vitamin Memories of B-12", accompanied by a dream which seemed to take its place among them. The dream, of course, was real, as most dreams are. Unlike most, it seemed too good a manifestation to miss. *Interzone* is here to distribute such gifts from the imagination, made by writers and artists with imaginative gifts. Not all of them are nightmares; not all of them are dreams. Many are committed in broad daylight or out of thin air, on the streets of the city or in the green south-west. Keep your eyes open for them. Let us know what you think when you see them. Your answers to our subscribers' questionnaire are coming in. If you haven't yet, do write in and tell us what you like, what you don't like, and what you'd like more of. And if that's not good enough, write or draw it yourself. If it will hold still long enough, photograph it. Send it in. We've introduced some fine new and unknown writers and illustrators, and there's space for plenty more. All the space you can imagine. There are ways of imagining that nobody will ever programme outside their own head; there are images that will never reach a video screen. Print still has its privileges. Are we thinking along the right lines? or even the same lines? ("I can't see the lines I used to think I could read between.") Are we too literal? or too lateral? *Interzone* must be a figment of everyone's imagination. Imagine yourself, in *Interzone*.

The vitamin dreamer wakes up, concerned for his circulation. So must we be. We have little money to spend on advertising campaigns. We spend our money on delivering goods, not on promising them. The market gives a magazine a choice: be good or be big. To be good and big, that's a pleasant dream. You can support *Interzone* now, while the price is down below the digests and paperbacks, before we have to raise it. Tell enough of your friends about *Interzone*, and perhaps we won't have to raise it. Support the present, with a view to the future. Underwrite a dream.

Colin Greenland



Illustrated by St John Child (cover), David O'Connor (p.3), Trevor Brown (p.9), Edwin Dorff (pp.16 17), Carolyn Scrase (p.27), Chris Jones (pp.31 35).

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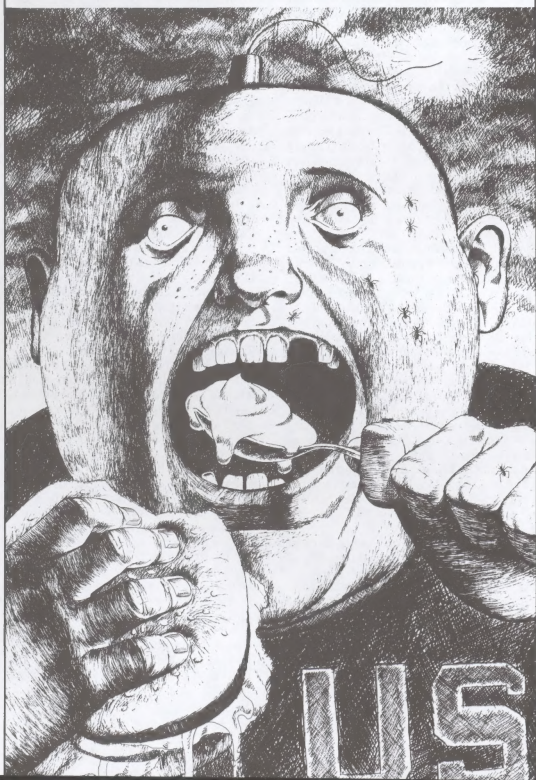
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the **FLASH!** kid

Scott Bradfield





Rudy McDermott's siege of the termite nest was inspired by the funny word "attrition", introduced to him by his birthday book, *We Were There at the Hundred Years War*. He shoveled a moat circumscribing the infested oaklog and filled it generously with Pennzoil looted from Father's outboard. The termites, busy inside their mouldering apartments, evinced no immediate concern, and Rudy dashed home for lunch. He returned a half an hour later to find the insects constructing a bridge across the moat with accumulating drowned corpses. They swarmed headlong into the muck in a sort of conscientious frenzy. Rudy struck a match and ignited the moat. The ring of fire flashed and heat rushed his face. The fried insects smelled like burnt popcorn. Greasy black smoke lifted into the bright mountain sky, flames dwindled into the scorched earth. Rudy replenished the moat and lay back against a warm flinty hill, watching the discombobulated insects struggle and squirm in the ashey sludge. He flicked small stones at them as they carted their sizzling bretheren into deep, buzzing tombs. Rudy reignited the moat and ran home for an icecream and a brief chat with Father.

Father was out back on the raised sundeck with Mom. *Fatherwah!* Father roared, and flung the newspaper over the railing. A few white sheets skimmed down the surface of the hill like mantarays. What's this I read? My tax-deductible religious contributions provide flak jackets for Sister Maria Theresa's guerilla force in Uruguay! And who's Sister Maria fighting for? Subversives, that's who! And who do subversives hate most of all? Successful men like me, that's who!

For godsake, Mom groaned, prone on her lawnchair and bikinied, brown and glistening with oil like a very old salad. If there's one thing you sound stupid about it's politics.

Father grumbled, his face flush. A black vein pulsed ominously in his forehead. He poured himself another icy Margarita, sprinkled it with salt.

Termites, huh? Father said later, solaced by now with his fishingrod. He reeled in line from a spool that twitched and tumbled on the deck, and Rudy watched rapidly over his dribbling icecream. My old pal Bob Probosky and I knew all about termites. Or at least I did, yessir. When I was your age I busted open a termite nest, that's what I did. Bob was chicken, scared he'd get stung. Not me, though. I reached in and yanked out that mamatermite with my bare hands, diced her for bait. She caught trout like a goddamn gattling gun — yessir, she did! But did I let that fag Probosky use any? Nosir, I didn't! Sure I got stung. But I knew what I had to do and I did it — and I reaped the reward. The world's a jungle, boy, and only the fittest survive. You have to act fast if you want to make your mark on the world. That's how you become a successful man like your Father —

For godsake. If there's one thing you sound stupider about than politics it's your crummy childhood.

With a sledgehammer Rudy returned and demolished the nest, pried black sheaves of rotted wood. The mamatermite was enormous, Rudy startled. Gravid and glistening, as long and thick as Father's forearm, the queen's convoluted envelope fitted snugly inside the log like the meat of some gigantic walnut. Reach in and yank it out? He would need a

bucket. Rudy improvised, swung the sledgehammer again. Pus and slime splattered his arms and face. The stench was terrible, he tasted it in his mouth. He ran away crying and crashed through bushes and a small stream. The crowd of trees stood around making shadows, birds chirped in the leaves. Rudy stopped shivering, obligated by Father's nostalgic courage. He walked back solemnly to the ruined nest. Termites swarmed around the exploded queen, dragging away slivers of flesh. Rudy screwed the lid from a jellyjar, crouched, shut his eyes. He scooped blindly at the nest and the jar make a thwucking sound. He screwed back the lid and flung the jar against the flinty hill where it thudded soundly. Rudy's hands were sticky, he wiped them against the ground. The ground was dry and crusty and broke apart in shards. Rudy threw the flinty dirt across the ruined nest, cut more dirt loose with his bowie knife. Something metallic clanged and the knife bucked against his hand. He scraped the dirt curiously. Metal screeched. Gradually Rudy cleared a patch of gunmetal black. The black was remarkably smooth, like the surface of an eyeball. A sense of heaviness surfaced in his mind when he touched the buried object. Like *déjà vu*, abstract but firm. Patiently he uncovered the statue's entire surface. Two feet long, tubular, black and smooth and unblemished, without any markings or delineations whatever, seamless as the skin of an egg. He struck it sharply with his knife and the knife point cracked. His fingers were drawn again and again across the smooth surface, as if here was condensed the enigmatic stuff of the universe. He clenched his teeth. Overhead the moon hooked vague clouds, and Rudy wondered, Who to tell? Who, indeed?

Sure, we'll take a look at it, Father agreed. Someday, someday soon. But not today, not right this minute. Right this minute there was fishing to do, imported beer to drink, Mom to inanely bicker with. Mom drove to Tahoe and returned by dinner, her freshly dyed hair piled high atop her dry red face, accompanied by a strange noisy couple. The man was in the stock market, the woman in the Book-of-the-Month Club. The woman hugged Rudy viciously. The man said ha ha ha, what's that, young buck? A termite how big? I saw that movie. Jon Agar saves the world, doesn't he?

The image of the submerged, neglected statue infiltrated Rudy's dreams. They were deep black dreams without faces, a quicksand effluvium which filled his mind like molten ore, as if his identity and the identity of the statue were being inverted. The dreams encased Rudy in darkness; he was warm, secure; his body was a vessel hard and unimpressonable, like something fired in a kiln, like the heart of a planet, like the fine black powder he discovered inside the abandoned jellyjar the next morning. The fine kinetic powder jingled sibilantly as he swirled it around the inside of the glass, keening, eerie, celestial, like purported music of the spheres.

The first person Rudy lured to the statue took it away from him. A young surveyor had been prowling the woods for several days, unshaven, muttering, scratching himself, toting a small intricate telescope and clipboard. Rudy's approach was determinedly casual. He was learning that a child's enthusiasm is inversely proportional to the scale of adult priorities. Hey, Mister. Want to see something weird? Hey, Mister. It's right over here. Maybe somebody lost it. Hey

Mister.

Okay, okay, the young man conceded finally. Show me something weird. But then promise you'll go home, all right? Could you do that for me? Promise?

**M**mmmmmmmm. Interesting . . . The surveyor touched the statue briefly, as if testing a hot iron. Cautiously he laid his palm flat against the frictionless surface, whistled slowly through his teeth. So heavy, he said, and clenched his jaws.

As the surveyor stared, Rudy's sanctioned enthusiasm ran free. He babbled hectically of his discovery: the doomed termites, the Pennzoil, Father's nostalgic fishbait, Mom's new hairstyle, the gravid queen, the imminent dreams and the fine black powder.

The surveyor grumbled, scratched his oily hair, scrawled something on his clipboard, and proceeded to the fishing lodge.

Hey, Mister — can I come? Rudy asked, was not refused.

Rudy pressed his face against the glass-paneled telephone booth, breathing mist against the glass and pretending he was an enormous fish in a bowl.

Andy? the surveyor said. This is Steve. Yeah, the connection's bad. I'm up at Caple's Lake . . . What? Dunnigan, Steve Dunnigan. No, I don't have a sister. We were in Dr Tennyson's seminar together, remember? Okay, okay — just forget it. I've found something you'll want to take a look at —

Here, Dunnigan said, shutting the glass booth behind him. Buy yourself some baseball cards.

Rudy accepted the quarter cordially, slipped it in his pocket, went to the lodge and bought a pound bag of beef jerky with one of the twenties from his genuine cowhide wallet. He sat on the front steps and chewed as he watched Dunnigan hurry bags and equipment from his cabin into a battered red Toyota. When Dunnigan drove off, the Toyota's flimsy clutch rattled like a marble in a soup can.

Rudy went home for dinner, rapidly consumed two steaks, a potato, no broccoli, three hot slices of cherry pie, and a frozen Snicker's bar. Upstairs in his loft he was only mildly queasy, and watched the portable television underneath his bedcovers. He fell asleep and resumed the dreams again, awoke in a cold sweat, his stomach protuberant and growling. He slipped downstairs and managed a pair of icecream sandwiches, returned to bed and the dreams again. It was as if his mind was being fed on a very short loop. Eggs for breakfast, four or five scrambled. Mom was pleased, offered encouragement. Another sandwich? Cookies? More milk, Rudy? Eat, eat! Marie and the girls are always talking about your skinny arms . . . Father said, Good for you, boy! Build those muscles. You can't be a skinny little whimp all your life. You have to be tough, you have to take care of yourself in this world, boy. You think I'm not tough? Go on, then; try me. Hit me in the stomach. Go ahead, hit me. Harder. Harder, now! Show some muscle, boy! I've swatted gnats harder than that!

**D**unnigan returned in the afternoon with a goateed, circumspect man. They conferred beside the sunken statue, consulted pocket-size devices, and departed in a jeep. Dunnigan returned again the following morning with more men, equipment, jeeps. Rudy visited the site daily, saw crowbars snap like

popsicle sticks, pneumatic hammers grind to a halt, strong men with ringed underarms herniate in chorus, puny forklifts roar as cables snapped everywhere. Helicopters beat overhead the secluded lakeland property, CB radios spluttered and squawked in the crisp mountain air. Still, the object did not budge. It would not budge. It was stubborn, heroic and invulnerable, Rudy thought. Just like Superman.

Father and Mom bugged quite readily, however, packed Rudy up with the belongings and relocated to the relative sanctity of their San Francisco mansion, where Rudy explored the daily papers with casual regularity. The initial notice appeared in the back pages of the *Chronicle*, amidst advertisements for lingerie and quick-weight-loss clinics. Rudy's name was included in the blurb, Dunnigan's, date and location of find, difficulties encountered. A mere journalistic kernel, yet fecund, perseverent, it rooted and advanced to page two as *Life Buried in Strange Object?* and blossomed ultimately in frontpage headlines:

**LIFE BURIED IN STRANGE OBJECT!**

— Child Unearths Cosmic Treasure

Father and Mom began introducing Rudy to their friends as "the little archaeologist in the family" before posting him off to bed when another reporter infiltrated the party. The phone rang ceaselessly, Mom had the number changed. Reporters and cameramen populated the front porch, lunatics verged on the perimeters. The streets resounded with cymbals, tambourines. Bull horns proclaimed the sovereignty of Jesuschristallmighty. The *Flying Saucer Gazette* accused Rudy of conspiring with sentient vegetable protein from Betelgeuse. Satanists dropped by evenings for coffee and, rebuked, splattered sheep's blood on the lawn, driveway, and deluxe Mercedes convertible. A flurry of Dianetic brochures arrived daily with the harried postman. Red journalism complemented topical hysteria. *Cosmic Statue Predicts Earthquakes!!!* Jeanne Dixon Communicates With Telepathic Statue in Esperanto!!! Cosmic Boon to Acne Sufferers??? Rudy chatted happily with the interchangeable lunatics and newsmen until his family's tolerance was "overextended", Father's press release declared. All he can tell you, Mom shouted one day, yanking Rudy inside, is that he found the thing, he gave it away, and then he came right home! Crestfallen, Rudy was denied permission to pose for the covers of *Jack and Jill Monthly* and *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. For the rest of the summer Rudy was relegated to the video entertainment console of his isolate bedroom.

Dunnigan, along with the "cosmic treasure", was appropriated by UC Regents Berkeley. An Associate Professorship in Archeology compensated the former while an elaborate wing of the Physical Research Center secluded the latter. Dunnigan appeared frequently on network news programs and *The Tonight Show*, *Starring Johnny Carson*. Frankly, Johnny, we're baffled, he conceded. We can't penetrate the object's shell, but ultrasound has detected embedded proteins, minerals, rudimentary enzymes — materials implicit in the genesis of life. As I told you over dinner, the statue's shell is so dense that the molecules are virtually impacted together. Conceivably billions of years old, it's perhaps the byproduct — or so contend the latest theories — of some titanic implosion, the devastating force of which would be unconscionable even

in our nuclear-conscious age. Dunnigan gave the unconscionable audience an ingratiating, winsome smile, like a Nobel Laureate confronted by some giddy coed.

Rudy switched off the television. It was late. He couldn't sleep. The resumption of grammar school foreclosed upon the vanished summer like some formidable mortgage. Rudy awoke the next morning in an empty house. Dad in Rio, Mom in bed. The lunch, prepared by the maid, was folded inside a double bag on the kitchen counter. Rudy scanned the *Chronicle's* comic page and devoured an eight-ounce box of Rice Puffies. Public concern over the statue had receded in the wake of renewed Midwest skirmishes. Rudy went to the bathroom, vomited anxiously, brushed his teeth, removed a frozen Snicker's bar from the freezer, and chewed as he departed for the bus stop. Father had won the debate years ago concerning Rudy's education. He's going to public, not be a sissy, just like me.

**O**n the streetcorner Kent Crapps and Marty Femester were passing an untidy cigarette back and forth, inexpertly rolled from Bugle tobacco and parting at the seam. Rudy sat on the curb and handled his lunchbag to tatters.

Hey. If it ain't the rich kid. Hey, Crapps. Ain't that the poor little rich kid?

Sure is, Crapps said. It looks like two rich kids, if you ask me. Hey, fat boy. You better stop eating so much. You're liable to *explode*!

Rudy sat forlornly as he heard them approach. The wrecked cigarette bounced off his knee and he brushed at sparks.

Hey, maybe the fat boy's hungry. You think so, Crapps? You think he might like a marshmallow? There's a marshmallow, there in the gutter. It's a little muddy, but maybe the fat boy's *real* hungry.

Rudy hunkered submissively, anticipating customary ridicule.

Hey, fat boy. Look what we fixed you to eat—

As the imperative mudfilled hand clamped Rudy's mouth, something unfamiliar activated abruptly in his mind. Something alert, canny, uncompromising.

Help help help quit it no no help help blech! Marty struggled weakly, like a small damaged sparrow. There, Rudy thought, his arm not strong so much as intent. You eat the mud this time. At a discrete distance Kent Crapps bounded up and down and shrieked for the police. Rudy wasn't even angry. He just wanted them to know he could take care of himself now. He had new responsibilities, through his discovery of the statue a sort of implied integrity. The weight of the buried statue filled the deep part of his mind. Nothing can hurt you, the deep voice confirmed, resounding in the immensity of remembered dreams that whirled, unalterable and patient, impervious and eternal.

Young men have responsibilities I don't care who started it you can't carry on like hoodlums what if everybody behaved like that I'm doing this for your own good, the principal pronounced, and down came their pants. The secretary pulled shut the office door. Rudy neither whined nor protested at his turn. He was supremely confident, and listened to the deep dreamy monotone of the buried voice. Returning to class he met wary eyes and whispers. He ate a magnanimous lunch alone in the cafeteria and cached burps to be released later, in class, in improvisatory bleats.

**G**rade school was a breeze.

Ha ha ha, everybody laughed, orbiting him in the schoolyard. Occasionally Rudy grabbed the scrawniest of them — a homely, wheezing asthmatic — and twisted his limbs one at a time. He commanded the asthmatic to confess explicit sex crimes with his mother, his father, his dog. Everybody laughed and even the asthmatic grinned plaintively. You're a riot, Rudy. You are — you're the funniest guy I know. You oughta be a comedian. Rudy never suspected himself of bullying. He was merely amusing his friends. He viewed popularity as a social obligation, like the ballot. When the bell rang the timid orbiting boys dispersed readily to their classes and Rudy, in his own time, lumbered along behind, thirteen years old and one hundred ninety seven pounds, and nobody threatened him anymore. Not even his parents.

**R**udy! Rudy, stop that! You heard me, young man! Let go of your mother — I mean *right this minute!* Father bellowed punily.

Damn, Rudy thought, releasing Mom's red perfumed arm. Damn if anybody sends me to military school, and flung the academy brochure in the trash. I'm not a failure. I will succeed. I am tough, too, and I will make my mark on the world. Just watch.

Father and Mom departed for the Riviera, and left Rudy under the aegis of a reluctant maid. Just fine with me, Rudy thought. I don't need anybody. I'm happy to be me, just like they recommend on television talk shows. He deposited himself at the kitchen table and trooped through a stack of grilled cheese sandwiches as if through so many Saltines.

**R**udy dropped out of school at sixteen. Father leased him a two bedroom apartment in the Financial District and promptly departed with Mom to Rio where, it was rumored, they developed a successful liaison with two blonde, liquid women Mom had met in Toronto the year before. Rudy, meanwhile, ate. Mountains of toast, vistas of jelly and syrup, acres of Rice Puffies and Sugar Dongs and Candy Cakes and Twinky Pies. Crushed plastic cereal toys littered the floors of his apartment. A mobile landmark, Rudy strolled immensely through the neighborhood, easily visible from office buildings, helicopters, incoming passenger planes. He visited Taco Heaven, Mrs Mary's Candy House, Happy Jack's Ice Cream Palace, and returned home munching candy apples, barbecued sides of beef, Big Macs. He squeezed blithely through crowds of slim, fashionable secretaries, and never glanced twice at their slit skirts, high heels, polished nails. Desire never pestered Rudy, his pubic hair remained downy, innocent. The family doctor proposed hormonal "supplementation". Adamant, Rudy refused. He was not sick. He was inconceivably healthy. His life was purposeful, coherent and determined: he ate, he slept, he waited.

**S**teve Dunnigan appeared at Rudy's door one summer afternoon. Rudy was uncertain of the year. The seasons had flitted past like moths. Rudy shifted his weight away from the door and Dunnigan sidled into the cluttered apartment. Dunnigan wore a faded Grateful Dead teeshirt, stained levis, tattered Keds. My, how you've grown, Dunnigan said.



Rudy slumped into a beanbag chair and the straining plastic envelope burst with a pop, spewing brown varnished beans everywhere. Rudy sagged unconcernedly as the chair depleted, listening to the vague familiar man through his stuffy brain.

I came to warn you, Dunnigan said.

Rudy yawned. Dunnigan scratched his head, and white dandruff spilled onto the floor.

Have you heard of IRM, Rudy?

No, Rudy croaked, and massaged his adam's apple circumspectly.

Innate Releaser Mechanism. Genetic knowledge, knowledge coded into the DNA. Instinct, really. But an instinct, a mechanism, which must be triggered by a behavioral cue, understand? Mother bird does a little dance, perhaps, and activates the fledgeling's migratory program. Then the fledgeling departs for Tehachapi, Capistrano, Guam.

Rudy reached for a crushed Ritz Cracker box, rattled crumbs into his mouth.

The cue was tactile, Rudy.

Rudy tore open the box, licked more yellow crumbs from waxed paper.

A few years ago, undergraduates in the UC Research Program came into contact with the statue. Today these students are withdrawn, anti-social, disrespectful of authority, obese, and under heavy sedation at UC Medical. The doctors and scientists have agreed on a tentative diagnosis. The prognosis is catastrophe . . . Rudy, are you listening?

Rudy picked up the telephone and dialed Chicken Delite. Three buckets of center breast, he thought, and a gallon of coleslaw. The line was busy.

The statues are containers, Rudy, distributing life's essential ingredients throughout the universe. But the molecules of the container must be fused, the container launched. Think of a simple atomic reaction. A solitary atom is split, and the devastation is well publicized. Your body is composed of how many trillions of molecules, Rudy?

Rudy put down the phone, his head lolled against the wall. A few last beans dribbled from the exhausted plastic envelope.

Cosmic evolution — just think of it, Rudy. Life is forged from calamity, catastrophe, annihilation. The ultimate purpose of life — mere perseverance. And the law of evolution? Survival of the fittest —

Father, Rudy said. Hypnagogic, he stared at the ceiling.

Rudy, wake up!

Rudy started upright. Chicken Delite? he asked.

Would you like to see the statue again, Rudy? Would you like that?

Yes, Rudy thought. Yes yes. He raised himself courageously to his feet. The varnished beans seethed on the floor.

There's food in my car. Hungry, Rudy? Come on, Rudy, come on . . . Dunnigan led Rudy out the door, rolled open the side of his van.

Rudy clambered inside, smelling pizza. Three cardboard containers streaked with oil. He opened the top box. The pizza was still warm, the cheese stiff and congealed. He divided the slices and transferred them, slice by slice, into his mouth. The door of the van slammed shut, bolts were thrown. Rudy chewed pepperoni, mozzarella, briny anchovies.

The van's engine erupted, along with a nervous spasm in Rudy's gut.

The van moved. An air vent communicated with the driver's seat.

Everything will be fine, Rudy. They dig out a tiny chunk of your brain — no bigger than a sausage. You'll be happy, then. People will like you; you'll like people. We'll start you on an exercise regimen, a diet. Hell, with your money, you can just take your pick of the ladies. You won't be lonely anymore. You'll be just like everybody else.

But I'm not like everybody else, Rudy reassured himself, and placed his palm against his stomach. Something percolated deep inside, his bowels contracted. He tried to hold it in. Father would get very mad. Father hated when Rudy smelled up the car, and rolled down the electric windows.

Just you wait and see, Rudy. We can command top dollar from the university, once I inform them of your condition. Let me handle it. Did I tell you they fired me from the university? I used to know Johnny Carson and his wife personally. Now what's my doctorate worth? A job delivering all-night pizza to junkies, high school parties, perverts. But I've learned. This time they'll deal on my conditions. This time I'll demand tenure —

The pressure mounted in Rudy's stomach. He cried out.

What's that? Watch your temper, Rudy. I don't want you ending up like the others at UC Med. Armstraps and thorazine — very uncomfortable. And more than anything, Rudy, I want you to be comfortable. The fridge at our Motel is packed with Candy Cakes, Twinky Pies, Rice Puffies, and plenty of that white soul food — mayonnaise and Wonderbread.

Rudy returned the final slice of pizza to the container, closed the lid. He had lost his appetite.

— Did I mention the color teevee?

Rudy lay flat on his back, gripping his stomach with both hands. Just when the pain grew intolerable, the deep voice interposed. Life is light. Life is calamity, catastrophe, annihilation. You are life, Rudy. Annihilate. Annihilate color teevee, Rice Puffies, UC Medical, Innate Releaser Mechanisms, the Financial District, military school, the homely asthmatic, the monotone principal, marshmallows, Johnny Carson, icy Margaritas, Sister Maria Theresa, Uruguay, Father and Mom. Will they see me in Rio? Rudy asked. Just before they feel the impact of your cosmic prestige, the voice answered. Rudy chuckled contentedly. His colon fluttered.

Will they be proud? What will they think when they see me?

What the termites thought when the hammer came down. Life is light.

Every muscle in Rudy's body contracted abruptly. And then, just before the flash, Rudy knew for certain he would make his mark on the world.

**Scott Bradfield** resides in California. This is his first published story, and we hope to see many more from him.

# The Tithonian Factor

Richard Cowper

**I**n all my National Service the time I spent working with the ghosts was far and away the spookiest — if you'll excuse the pun, or whatever it is.

What happened?

Nothing happened. Well, not in the way you mean it. It was just — well, spooky. I still get dreams from it sometimes.

What sort of dreams, Sarah?

Dreams of the old days. Strange dreams. Sad ones.

Tell me.

That's just it. I can't. I can never remember them properly.

Then how do you know they're sad?

Because I wake up crying, stupid.

Really?

And then I find myself remembering — not the dream, but *them* — the ghosts, the Sempiterns. And I recognise the feeling I used to have when I'd been with them — a sort of awful *helplessness* like — like watching someone drowning when you can't swim.

Didn't you talk to Control?

What about?

Well, ask for a transfer or something?

I didn't want a transfer, Jo. I just wanted to help them someway — and I couldn't. I couldn't reach them.

How do you mean?

It's hard to explain unless you've met them, and how many of us do that? Even if you *did* meet one you wouldn't know what they were unless you'd been told. It's only after you've been with them for a while that it begins to get to you.

What does?

The spookiness of it — your situation — of their situation.

Their age, you mean?

Well, obviously that's part of it, of course, but it's not that exactly. After all, that's something we all know about, something we've been told. What I'm talking about now is something different, something

that's in them, a sort of frozen sadness which lies deep, deep down in the backs of their eyes where no one can ever reach it.

They talked about it?

One of them did. Once.

What did he say?

It wasn't a he.

Well, *she* then. Go on. Tell me about it, Sarah.

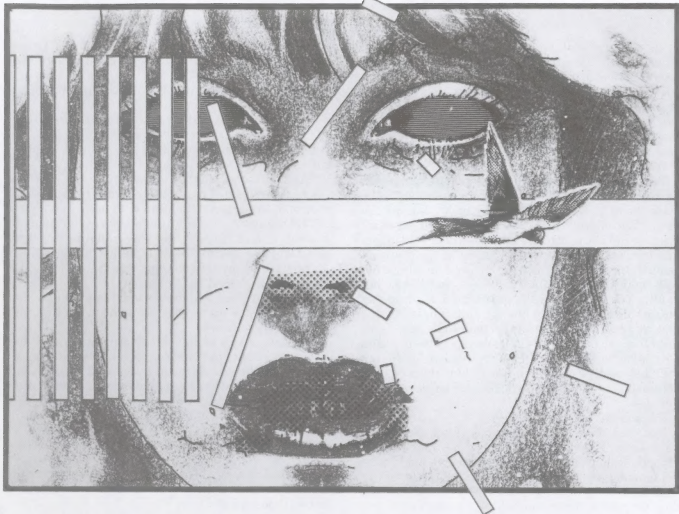
**I**t happened on my birthday — my sixteenth — when I was stationed down at Marlow. There were six of us assigned to Waterside — that's the Grace and Favour hospice — a huge old house beside the river. We were on attachment to the regular staff which meant that we didn't have any special duties in the running of the place but were just there on hand to help out wherever we were needed.

Sounds like a real old skive to me.

Well, yes and no. The Director of the place, Father Petrie, was a real sweetie, but we Nats were under Sister Philippa and she kept a pretty beady eye on us. Except for Andrew who was a Fourth we were all Third Graders, which meant Technique Exercises from eight to ten each morning and a full Response Cycle every third day. But for the rest of the time we just loafed around and chatted up the ghosts or helped out in the kitchens or the gardens. I went for the gardens mostly because, after a bit, being with the Sempiterns made me feel uncomfortable. I don't know why — I *didn't* know why then, I mean. Besides, the weather was glorious that May. I spent most of my time purring around the place on a mower — they had about a million acres of lawn — and after a week or two I was as brown as a biscuit.

Most of the time I was as near naked as makes no difference — shorts, sandals, and a floppy yellow sun-hat. Some of the Sempiterns used to peek at me through binoculars from the upstairs windows. I knew because I'd see the sun winking from the lenses. It was a bit of an eerie feeling — like being brushed with invisible





cobwebs — but most of the time I don't suppose I even noticed it.

On the afternoon of my birthday I was mowing a part of the grounds which was out of sight of the house. There was a backwater — a sort of artificial creek drawn off the main river — which led up to a boathouse. It was tucked away behind a lot of trees and shrubs — rhododendrons and suchlike — and nobody seemed to go there except the gardeners who had the job of keeping the place tidy. There wasn't really much grass to mow — just a long, narrow strip winding along beside the water, and when I'd done that I switched off the machine and went to take a poke around. Just pure, idle curiosity.

It was that sort of hour in the early afternoon when the sun seems to need winding up again and the loudest sound is the buzzing of bees. Even the birds had nodded off and the smell of the grass I'd cut hung over everything like a sort of warm sleepy oil. I wandered up to the boathouse and had my hand on the door latch when I heard a noise from inside...

Well? Go on. What sort of a noise?

Eh? Oh, someone talking.

So?

I know I shouldn't have listened but I couldn't help myself. I'm not just saying that, Jo, I really mean it. It was as though I'd become part of a happening which needed me to be there in order for it to work — but a happening which I didn't know anything about, so I couldn't shape it.

You mean you think you were being chosen?

You tell me! Perhaps I just happened to be lying around handy and got drawn into it somehow. Any-

way, that's what Father Petrie thought.

Father Petrie! You talked to him about it?

That was later.

Well, what happened?

To start with I thought it was two people talking — two women — one answering the other. But then I wasn't so sure — the voices sounded too much alike for one thing. They were very quiet — I couldn't really make out anything they were saying — and I'd just about decided to sneak away when I heard one of them call out: "Who's that? Who's there?"

"It's me," I said. "Sarah Jackson. I'm sorry. I didn't know there was anyone in there."

**T**here was a scuffling noise and then a sound of footsteps on duckboards and a moment later the door was pushed open from inside and there we were staring at each other. I recognised her as one of the ghosts — a Mrs Cassel — and I guess she recognised me too because I saw her glance down at my bare tits and give a funny twitchy sort of a smile. "Do you want a boat?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "I was just curious about the place," I said. "I didn't think there'd be anyone here. I'm really sorry if I've disturbed you."

She gave me a long thoughtful look and then shook her head and smiled again. "It doesn't matter," she said. "After all, it's not my private property. Come along in."

She stepped back inside and I ducked my head and followed her. For a second or two I was bat-blind after the bright sunshine but there was quite a lot of light coming in through the half-open water-doors and I

could soon see well enough. I glanced round for the other person and of course there was no one else. I wasn't really surprised at all.

There were a couple of row-boats tied up and a punt. Lying in the bottom of the punt were some faded cushions and an open book. Somehow I guessed that Mrs Cassel was the only person who ever came near the place — it had that sort of feel about it.

What was she like?

To look at, you mean? About my height, with wide, dark blue eyes and fine, silky blonde hair which she wore down to her shoulders. If I hadn't known she was a Sempitern I'd have said she was in her early thirties. But she was really lovely, Jo, beautiful in that timeless, eternal sort of way — I mean she'd have been beautiful anywhere, any time. Everything about her was right, balanced, all of a piece — her hands, her mouth, her nose, her neck, the shape of her face, her figure. It made you feel clumsy and lumpy just to look at her. All the Sempiterns tend to be pale — it's something to do with their metabolism, I think — and with some of them it really is pretty ghastly. But not with her. Mrs Cassel's skin was right that way — sort of translucent — with faint, dusky blue shadows under her eyes.

But spooky with it?

Not then. Not that afternoon. I think there must have been a sort of link between us that we both sensed. Perhaps it was because we'd both opted out a bit, gone our own private ways, and then we'd met up by chance on common ground in that dead hour of the day. Or maybe it was something else. But after that first moment when she'd opened the door I didn't feel the least bit awkward with her. I just sort of looked around and said, "Yes, it really is nice in here. Really peaceful."

"I know," she said. "That's why I come here."

I could see it was time for me to get back to my mowing and leave her to enjoy it and I said as much.

She stretched out her arm and touched my shoulder with her fingertips. "Don't go yet," she said. "Stay a while and talk to me."

I dithered a bit but I couldn't think of any convincing reason for backing out so in the end I said, "O.K. Why not?" and I stepped down into the punt and plonked myself on one of the cushions.

She climbed in after me and there we were sitting and smiling at one another in a shy sort of way while the punt rocked up and down and the ripples went *tock-tock* against the row-boats. Her book was lying open between us and I glanced down at it. The page was upside down but from the way it was printed I could see it was poetry. "Do you like poems?" I asked her.

"Some," she said. "Poems of the old days. Do you?"

I told her I used to like them a lot when I was young.

"And how old are you, Sarah?"

"Sixteen," I said. "Today's my birthday as a matter of fact."

"Really?" she said. "Congratulations on scaling the dizzy peak of sixteen!"

"And how old are you, Mrs Cassel?" Honestly, Jo, it was out before I could stop myself. I could've died, I swear I could!

"Well, older than that, certainly," she said and gave a kind of little snort of a laugh.

"I'm so sorry," I said — my face must've been a real sight — "I really am, Mrs Cassel. Please forget I ever said it."

"But why should I? And why should you apologise? Is that what you've been taught?"

I nodded and felt as if my ears were steaming.

"They told you it would distress us?"

I mumbled some sort of apology. Oi, was I embarrassed!

"And what else did they tell you?"

I just shrugged. I really didn't want to discuss all that, and certainly not then and with her.

"Take great care not to disturb the even tenor of their days and ways?" She was imitating the way Sister Philippa used to talk and I couldn't help grinning.

"So tell me how old you think I am, Sarah. I promise I won't be distressed."

I raised my head and looked at her and I knew that she really did want to hear my answer. "A hundred and forty?" I guessed.

She gave a sort of lop-sided smile and shook her head. "I was born in two thousand and five," she said, "and I took the plunge when I was twenty-six. I shall be exactly a hundred and twenty-seven years old on the eighteenth of July."

"You became a Sempitern in thirty-one?"

She nodded.

"But I thought it was all made illegal long before that."

"Officially, yes. But in those days there were still ways if you had the means. The last one I know took it in two thousand and forty."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said. "March, two thousand and forty. After that there wouldn't have been any point, would there?"

I shook my head. "Do you mind if I ask you something, Mrs Cassel?"

"Go ahead. Only I do wish you'd stop calling me Mrs Cassel. I never think of myself that way. To me I'm Margaret."

"Why did you do it, Margaret? What made you decide to become a Sempitern?"

She didn't answer straight away and then she said, "Well, I can tell you, but I'm sure you won't understand. You can't understand. You and I don't just belong to different generations, Sarah, we belong to different species. When I was your age, life, this life we're living here and now — that's all there was. Anything else was dreams, fairy tales, delusions. You were begotten by your parents, you were born, you lived, and then you ceased to live — you died. That was what we knew. For us death was the end of everything. So when Sempiterna was discovered we saw it as offering us the ancient Gift of the Gods — immortality. And, even better, the promise of eternal youth. In the hundred years since I became a Sempitern this body of mine has aged physically no more than ten."

As she said that she lifted up her bare left arm and touched it lightly with her fingertips and there was an expression on her face as though she was looking at something which only she could see — the ghost of her real arm maybe.

"And that was all it was?" I said. "Just wanting to

stay young for ever?"

She smiled at that. "There you are," she said. "I knew you wouldn't understand. None of you do. You're a true Gaian, Sarah. But in those days, when I was a child, it was different. It really was. Let me try to explain. When I was ten years old my grandmother — my mother's mother — came to live with us. She was very ancient, well into her seventies. We had a little house in Golders Green — that was a part of London — and I had to give up my own room to Gran and move in with my sister. My mother and father were very apologetic about it but they explained that it probably wouldn't be for very long because Gran was pretty feeble and doddery and wouldn't be with us for much longer — a few months at the most. Well, she stayed with us for *nine years*, and for most of them I prayed every night that she wouldn't wake up next morning. But she just went on and on and on getting more and more senile and in the end my mother had a nervous collapse. It was as if I was watching my family falling apart in front of my eyes and the cause of it was a person who wasn't even a person any longer, just a thing. She didn't even know what she was doing to us. Gran's world had shrunk to her mouth and her fingertips but she still wouldn't let go. When Mother had her breakdown we thought we'd be able to get Gran into a geriatric ward or something but they wouldn't hear of it. So long as we had the space and there were people around to spoon food into her and wipe her bottom they simply didn't want to know. Anyway, the whole Health System was in chaos by then so even if we had managed to get the Authority's permission the chances are she'd never have got in."

"So what happened?" I whispered. "What did you do?"

She raised her head — she'd been looking down at the book while she'd been saying this — and stared at me. "I ran away," she said. "Opted out. I just couldn't cope any more. I went to Paris and got myself a job. I was eighteen then. That Christmas, six months after I'd quit, my sister phoned me and told me that Gran had passed away and that Mother was ill again. The way she said it made me wonder what had really happened. Well, I found out eventually. One night Mother had reached the point of no return. She gave Gran a massive dose of barbiturates and then did the same to herself. Mother survived — just. I didn't go to Gran's funeral. I couldn't face it. Anyway the whole thing was quietly hushed up. It was such a common sort of tragedy in those days that no one wanted to know about it. Two months later they passed the Euthanasia Bill and within a year anyone over sixty could get a *Quietus* capsule on a doctor's prescription. In fact *Quietus* and *Sempiterna* both arrived in the same year. Strange, isn't it?"

I looked at her and I just didn't know what to say. I tried to tell myself that this had all happened more than a hundred years ago, but I knew that wasn't the point. By the way she'd told it I knew that for her it could all have happened yesterday — probably it was still happening somewhere inside her at that very second. And I remember thinking: Who'd ever have become a *Sempitern* if they'd known they'd have to go on living with that sort of memory for ever and ever? And suddenly it struck me that that's what sets them apart from us, those great invisible loads of sadness

they're humping around with them — things you and I could hardly even begin to imagine, like watching your kids grow old and fly free before your eyes while you were stuck fast there for ever like a wasp in treacle, only in this case the treacle you were stuck fast in was your own miserable self. Just thinking about it was so awful that I began to cry — I simply couldn't help myself.

Mrs Cassel knelt up in the bottom of the boat and put her arms around me and I heard her whispering: "Don't cry, child. There's no call for your tears. Those days are all over and done with long ago. We both know that." I felt her cheek soft against my cheek and the scent of her was as sad and as sweet as last year's rose petals.

I stopped snivelling after a bit but the pain which had caused it was still there inside me, only now it was dull and muffled, a sort of heaviness around my heart. I wondered if she felt better for having told me or worse because now she'd have me on her conscience too, but I reasoned that I wouldn't have been there at all if I hadn't been needed to be and that cheered me up a bit.

She began to kiss me, first on my face and neck and then on my breasts, while I stroked her hair and forgot for a little while how far apart we were from each other. A swallow flickered in through the water door, flew round us and darted back into the sunshine again, and I heard a clock chiming somewhere in the village. I counted three strokes and at the third I let my trueself slip free and then tried to reach down to hers. I could see it there inside her but it was screwed up all tight on itself like a clenched fist, and the more I tried to coax it loose the smaller and tighter it became till it was like a little, hard, dim knot cowering deep down in the dark and shadow of her. The tiny silvery trueself of the swallow came darting back and wove a pattern web around mine so I gave up trying and slipped back into my formself wondering if that swallow wasn't perhaps her own trueself's guardian though I'd never heard of any *Sempitern* having one before.

She must have guessed that something had happened even though, by her sort of reckoning, I couldn't have been out for more than a few seconds. She pushed herself away from me and I could see her fear like a darkness at the back of her eyes. "What did you do?" she whispered. "Where did you go?"

"I wanted to try and help," I said, "to try and reach your trueself. I'm sorry, Margaret. I didn't mean to frighten you."

For a long moment she didn't say anything — just stared at me. Then she said: "What you did is forbidden. You must know that."

I nodded but I didn't feel particularly worried — I suppose I must've known she'd never tell anyone else about it.

"But what did you...? What happened?"

"I uncaged myself," I said. "I flew free."

"You mean you died?"

It sounded so old fashioned and funny that I couldn't help smiling at her. "We don't use that word much," I said.

"But that's what happened," she said. "It is, isn't it?"



"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps they'd have called it that in the old days. Here. Give me your hand." I took up her hand in mine and laid it over my heart and held it there pressed against me. "You see," I said, "the bird still sings in the cage," and then I leant forward and kissed her on the cheek. "I must go now," I said, "or someone's bound to be wondering where I've got to."

She caught hold of my wrist and turned those huge dark eyes of hers full on me. "You'll come and see me again, won't you, Sarah?"

"Yes, sure I will, if you'd like me to," I said and I loosed my arm gently and stepped out of the boat on to the wooden track. As I reached the door I looked back and saw the swallow skimming in low over the water and this time a second one was following it.

I didn't go back to the boathouse next day because we had Responses. The day after that I found a note waiting by my plate at breakfast. All it said was, "Please come this afternoon, M."

Mrs Cassel was sitting in the boat when I got there. I was a bit later this time because I'd got through all my work first and put the machine to bed before I went to see her. I'd thought maybe she'd like it if we took one of the boats out on the river or something but as soon as I saw her I realised she'd got other ideas. For one thing she'd rearranged the cushions so that instead of our being at opposite ends we'd be slotted in side by side. And she wasn't exactly dressed for going anywhere either, though what she had on really suited her even if there wasn't much of it. When I told her so she laughed and said she had chosen it specially for me.

The thought of pairing off for a session of formplay with a Sempitern — even one as lovely as Mrs Cassel — gave me a pretty strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. To be honest I didn't think they were even interested in that side of things — certainly Sister Philippa had never suggested they might be when she was briefing us about our duties at Waterside — but it seemed to me that working an orgone nexus with Margaret Cassel was hardly in line with our aim of "preserving the even tenor of their days and ways". So I squatted down on the duckboards beside her and asked her if she was quite sure she knew what she'd be letting herself in for.

She gazed up at me so that I could see two tiny Sarah's reflected in those fantastic eyes of hers and then she smiled a sort of slow, soft smile that made me go all watery inside. "Do you, my dear?" she said.

"But have you ever shared a nex with one of us before, Margaret?"

"Is that so important?"

"I don't really know," I said. "But I think maybe you trueself..."

"Go on."

But I couldn't. I felt as if my skin was all charged up and a stream of invisible sparks was leaping across from me to her. I was shaking like a leaf on a tree. If there'd ever been a moment when I was in control I knew I'd lost it by then. There was a flicker while her formself seemed to go all faint and glimmery and I glimpsed the silvery flame of her trueself deep inside her and I remember hearing a voice whispering the odylic mantra and I suppose that must've been me. That's when Gaia shook the branch I was clinging to

and I was swirled away. After that nothing mattered any more.

I don't know how long it lasted and I still don't know what really happened. So many people have asked me questions about it and asked them in a way which has made me start thinking along the lines they were thinking along already, that I can't ever seem to get back to how it really was to me, then. Take the feng-shui business for instance. I didn't even know the boathouse was a feng-shui focus point till they showed it to me on the chart — didn't know in my mind, I mean — but when Father Petrie led me back to that first afternoon and took me all through it again under total recall, there I was standing with my hand on the latch and hearing the voices coming from inside and I knew I was part of it.

And it was Father Petrie who spotted that book Margaret had been reading. I couldn't have done it on my own. He led me up to it and held me there till I'd spelled it out to him — reading it upside down and all — though he only needed a line or two before he knew what it was and let me go on. I took him right through the whole of our first meeting up to when I'd left her there and gone back to my mowing, and then he released me. I thought he was going to make all sorts of trouble about my flying free with her, but he didn't — he just gave the others a sort of sideways look and a half-shake of his head so I guessed I'd been forgiven for breaking the rules — for the time being at any rate.

He asked me if I'd mind going under again and taking them through the second visit and I said I'd do it if they thought it would help. He talked me down and I led them back to the boathouse and there was Margaret waiting for me. I got through just as far as to where I've told you already and then I stopped. I could hear him coaxing me forward but there was something far stronger than Father Petrie saying, "No," and it was saying it not to me but to my trueself. "I can't!" I cried. "I can't! I can't! It won't let me!"

"What won't? What's stopping you, child?"

"The brightness."

"Fly free, Sarah."

"I can't. I mustn't."

"Is that all you can tell us?"

There was a long, long silence, and then I heard myself saying: "Margaret's free."

"Go on, child."

"She's trusted me. She's flown free."

"Where are you, Sarah?"

"In my formself. In the boat. I'm cold."

"And Margaret?"

And Margaret. This chill in my arms, in my naked breast and stomach, is that Margaret? Evening shadows are stealing across the water. The swallows have gone. Have I done right or wrong? Tell me, Gaia.

I still shiver when I think about it (just feel how my arms are shaking now!) but I wasn't frightened then even though I was lying across her naked formself and no bird was singing in her cage. I lifted my head from between her breasts and looked down into the gone-out lights of those dark eyes that had seen so many years go by which I knew nothing about and my own formself wept for her the tears hers couldn't. Then I kissed her one last time on her mouth and got

up and put my clothes on and left her lying there.

They asked me afterwards why I hadn't gone straight back to Waterside to tell someone what had happened and I told them it was because I didn't know what had happened. Besides, what harm could have come to Margaret's formself lying there so quiet and still in the dark boathouse? I just needed to be on my own for a while.

I wandered along the riverbank till my formself found a healing place beside some lilac bushes and laid down along the flow line. As the first stars came out I let my trueself slip free, little by little, until I felt Gaia moving under me, rocking me in her arms. That's when I knew for sure that what I'd done was right and was what I'd had to do.

I heard the clock strike nine and I got up and made my way back across the dewy lawns to the hospice. I went straight to Sister Philippa's room and knocked on the door. She called me in and I saw that Father Petrie and Doctor Maddern were with her. They were all drinking tea out of pink china cups and they looked pretty surprised to see me. Sister Philippa asked me if anything was the matter.

"It's Mrs Cassel, Sister," I said. "She's flown free. She's in the boathouse." And then I sort of let go. I just sat down on the floor and shut my eyes and went to sleep.

I didn't wake up till mid-day the next day but I think that Doctor Maddern may have had a hand in that. When I opened my eyes I found I was in the sick wing and one of the staff nurses was sitting beside the bed. "Hello," I said. "What am I doing here?"

"They brought you in last night," she said. "I wasn't on duty then. I'm to let Sister know as soon as you wake up."

She went out and I heard her talking on the phone. I got out of bed, found the bathroom and took a shower. I was drying myself when I heard voices outside and recognised one of them as Father Petrie's. There was a knock on the door and the nurse handed in my clothes and told me to get a move on.

Besides Father Petrie and Sister Philippa there was the Doctor and a man whose name I didn't know though I'd seen him around before. Father Petrie asked me how I was feeling and I said that I was feeling fine thank you but a bit hungry. He smiled at that.

They sat me down in a chair and arranged themselves in a sort of half-circle in front of me and then Father Petrie asked me if I'd mind telling them how I'd come to find Mrs Cassel in the boathouse. "I didn't find her there," I said, "I left her there," and they all looked at each other — all except Father Petrie that is. He just sort of nodded his head and said: "We want you to tell us everything that happened, Sarah. Right from the beginning."

**S**o I told them more or less what I've told you and when I'd finished Father Petrie asked me if I'd mind going through it all over again under hypnosis just so he could get things absolutely straight. That's how I came to learn about the brightness and Margaret's trusting me and how I'd cried the tears for her into her own eyes. He could have told me to forget all that but I suppose he had his own reasons for not wanting me to and when he finally let me go I saw that the four of them looked almost as shaken as I was.

I dried my eyes on the towel which I was still holding and the man whose name I didn't know reached across and patted my arm. "Thank you, my dear," he said. "Believe me, you have nothing to reproach yourself for. Nothing at all." Then he turned to Father Petrie and said, "So far as I am concerned the matter should be allowed to rest here, Father."

"Yes, I think we are all agreed on that, Mr Cassel. There will, of course, be certain formalities to be gone through, but nothing we can't handle on our own."

Doctor Maddern and Sister Philippa both nodded and then they all got up from their chairs, smiled at me in their different ways, and trooped out. I heard them talking among themselves in the next room then Father Petrie poked his head back round the door and whispered: "I'll be having lunch in my study, Sarah. Would you care to join me?"

He wasn't the kind of man you felt shy with — more like a sort of tall, friendly tree — so I nodded my thanks and he said: "Good. I'll see you down there in ten minutes," and then he disappeared again.

It wasn't a very exciting lunch actually — egg salad and bread and cheese — but he insisted on my having some of his too, and what with that and a glass of wine I didn't do too badly. He told me about the boathouse being a *feng-shui* focus and showed me the chart with all the lines flowing in along the creek and curling round those bushes where I'd gone on my mower that first afternoon, but he didn't actually say it had anything to do with what had happened.

It was then that I found myself saying: "You think she knew what was going to happen, don't you, Father?"

"No," he said, "I don't think she knew. I think she just hoped it might. And it did."

That really knocked me sideways. "You mean Margaret wanted to stay free?"

"I think she wanted to believe it might happen to her. Most of the Sempiterns do. But their instinct for physical survival is so terribly strong that when they come to the moment of trust they find it impossible to let go."

"But that's what she said!" I cried. "She said that about her own grandmother!"

"Unfortunately Mrs Cassel's grandmother didn't have you for a formlay partner."

"She was so beautiful, Father," I said. "Beautiful and gentle and sad. I couldn't not try to help her."

He gave me a long, thoughtful look. "Do you know why what you did is forbidden, Sarah?"

I shook my head.

"Because for them, for the Sempiterns, there is no way back. In them trueself and formself are one and indivisible. That was the single, awful, side-effect of Sempiterna that no one suspected until it was too late. We called it the Tithonian Factor. In the old days when we attempted to do what you did with Mrs Cassel the Sempiterns' trueselves clung to ours like drowning swimmers and would not let go."

I stared at him. "So what happened, Father?"

"Usually both formselfs perished. Once or twice our own managed to survive only to find that they were playing host to the Sempitern's trueself as well as their own."

"But how did they...?"

"They went insane."

I felt my skin gather itself up into a cold shiver of fright. "Then why didn't it....? Why didn't we....?"

"Gaia alone knows, child. Unless perhaps you can explain more precisely what you meant when you said, 'She's trusted me'."

"She flew free," I said.

"But how could you possibly know that?"

"Because I was her," I said. "I lent my own trueself to her. What else could I have done?"

"You lent her your trueself?" he repeated in a frozen sort of voice.

"Gaia borrowed it from me. Gaia lent it to her."

"Why didn't you say this before?"

"You didn't ask me."

He looked at me for a long time without saying anything, and then he shook his head slowly, sadly, and murmured: "Out of the mouths of very babes."

He got up from where he was sitting and went across the room to a bookshelf and took out a book. He turned over some pages and then read out that same poem which Mrs Cassel had been reading in the boat. I only remember the first part because I've never been able to understand the rest of it —

*Margaret, are you grieving  
Over Goldengrove unleaving?  
Leaves, like the things of man, you  
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?*

He read the poem all through and when he'd finished he closed up the book and looked at me.

"Was that written about her?" I asked him.

"No, no," he said. "It was written long before Margaret Cassel was born. I feel it might have been written about someone like you though."

"But my name's not Margaret," I pointed out. "So it wouldn't have worked."

He just laughed and put the book back on the shelf. Then he turned to me again and said, "Will you come to the boathouse with me, Sarah?"

That shook me a bit I can tell you! "Is she still there?" I asked.

"Her formself has been moved to the chapel."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"We think not," he said, "but only you can tell us that for sure. That's why I'm asking you. But you don't have to do it if you don't wish to."

"All right," I said at last. "So long as you stay with me."

So off we went to the boathouse and when we were about half way there I said, "I think we ought to come to it along the creek — from the river."

"Very well," he said. "Whatever you feel is right."

The moment we'd got beyond the trees I felt the flow of the *feng-shui* like a sort of slow, in-drawn breath drifting me along and I remember wondering vaguely why I hadn't noticed it when I'd come there the first time. I asked Father Petrie if he could feel it too, but he just smiled and sort of shrugged so I guessed he couldn't.

We came up to the boathouse and I put my hand on the latch and felt it all warm from the sun. I sensed that peculiar stillness which lies at the heart of every *feng-shui* focus like the calm eye of a tropical storm and I thought: What if he's wrong? What if she is still here? What shall I do then? The little ripples of my fear went circling out from me into the empty quiet-

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ness on the other side of the door and I felt the bird flapping its wings against my ribs. On the wall beside me I saw Father Petrie's shadow, long and dark and kind of reassuring and I bit my lip hard and thumbed the latch down.

It was all exactly as it had been before except that now there was no Margaret. I let go of the latch, drew in my breath and walked slowly along the duckboards. As I gazed down at the faded cushions where I had last seen her lying I knew I need have no fear of her at all. I stepped into the boat, lay back and looked up into Father Petrie's worried face. "It's all right," I said. "She doesn't need me now."

He nodded to me and I closed my eyes and flew free as quiet and easy as tipping water out of a cup. I looked down on Father Petrie kneeling beside the boat and then down upon my own familiar formself and it wasn't familiar at all! Well, it was and it wasn't. It was me, was mine all right, and yet I was seeing it differently, seeing it as if it was my chosen partner for a really terrific formplay session. It was just about the weirdest experience of my whole life, but I wasn't scared at all, just sort of shaken up, set trembling inside and, let's face it, excited.

I linked in again almost at once, opened my eyes and looked up at Father Petrie.

"Sarah?" he said, and the way he said it made me pretty certain that he wasn't a hundred percent certain that it really was me!

I drew in a deep breath and shook my head. "There's nothing there," I told him. "It's like I said. She's flown free."

He gave me a curious sort of questioning look, then he smiled at me and reached down and helped me to my feet. "That is a great relief to me," he said. "But now I must ask you to promise me in Gaia's name that you won't try helping any of our other guests in the way you helped Mrs Cassel. The risk is altogether too great."

I remembered what he'd told me about how they'd tried it in the old days and what had happened to them and I shivered. "I promise you, Father," I said. "In Gaia's name."

And that's really all there is to tell you. At the end of July I got my Fourth Grade and went down with Andrew to Sussex for my six months' Healers' Vocational. The day I left Waterside Father Petrie called me into his study and handed me a packet which he said Mr Cassel had asked him to give to me. In it was that book of poems which Mrs Cassel had been reading the first time we met. I tried reading one or two but I couldn't make head or tail of them and then Andrew borrowed the book from me and I haven't seen it since.

But I quite often find myself remembering Mrs Cassel, and, once or twice, it's occurred to me that maybe she was there when I went back to the boathouse with Father Petrie. It's the only way I can explain what happened when I flew free. I mean, couldn't I have been seeing my own formself as she must have seen it? Or was it just that my trueself was still carrying the shadow of hers — like a sort of scent left on it after she'd used it and then given it back to me? And why do I still have those strange, sad dreams of the old days?

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**Richard Cowper** (Colin Murry) has published numerous sf novels since the mid-1960s. Among the most highly-regarded are *Clone* (1972), *Twilight of Briareus* (1974) and *The Road to Corlay* (1978). His most recent book is *A Tapestry of Time* (Gollancz, 1982).

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## INTERZONE

We began with an editorial team of eight, and now we are six... Graham James left us after issue 2; now Malcolm Edwards has also announced his resignation from *Interzone*. But never fear: there are plenty of editors left!

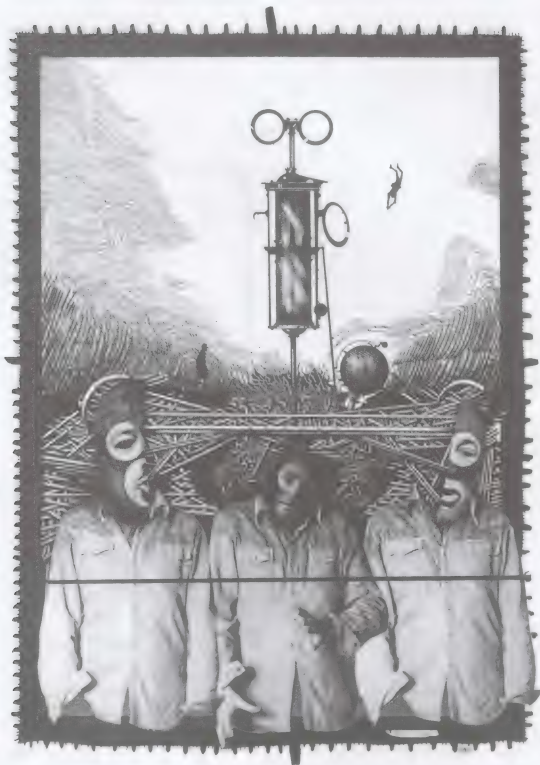
We are particularly grateful to Malcolm for all the hard work he has put into the magazine in its first eighteen months. He is leaving us because of the pressure of his professional and family commitments. We wish him all the best in his renewed full-time career as a publisher's editor.

We welcome a new designer, Catherine Bell, who is a student in the Department of Visual Communication at Brighton Polytechnic, and we say farewell and thank-you to the designer of our first four issues, Philippa Bramson.

Finally, we are very pleased to announce that the Association of Illustrators has chosen Chris Jones's drawing, which accompanies "Strange Great Sins" in this issue of *Interzone*, to be reprinted in their forthcoming *Annual*.

(DP)

## Vitamin Memories of B-12



### Vitamin Memories of B-12

I was given the two pictures in the evening before the nightmare. Perhaps the two incidents were unconnected. I remember a large house, a mansion, brilliantly appointed, all the curtains drawn. There were many people, some of them servants. I was jostled, someone tickled me, for a long while, mirthlessly. David Bowie arrived with a flannelette pouch of memorabilia identical to the one he had buried beneath the District Line. He was in collusion with a short-haired woman, my girlfriend. I have no girlfriend. I told him, Last time I met you you refused to speak to me. You set your hair on fire. He and she smiled at each other and began to burn me with many cigarettes. I had been offered a drink before dinner. I overheard a friend betray me to someone I could not see, someone who was hunting me. I thought, It's time to go for that drink. The bar was in the basement. I fled down secret ladders which led from top to bottom of the house.



### Advertisements for the Suicide Museum

I passed the salon of the headmaster's wife and entered the bar. A housemaid asked me not to turn out the lights. Several middle-aged men assembled guiltily. They discussed advertisements for the suicide museum, how a less terrifying exhibit, say, some famous poisoned milk, might induce people to inquire further. I understood this was to be a demonstration. The housekeeper emptied a jug of rancid milk onto the carpet. A friendly young man approached me, arm outstretched, and asked me to teach him to scramble egg without burning it. I felt victimised. Everyone conspired to keep me off-balance with absurdities; yet if I ventured some eccentricity of my own they all stared. I needed to break out. Any occasion would do. The young man was cramming a large sandwich into his mouth. The sandwich, that would do. I screamed at it and woke, feeling unwell. I thought, if I am unwell I might take more of my vitamins. I remembered omitting to take the vitamin B tablet for my circulation, and took it.

Colin Greenland



# NOVELTY

John Crowley

I

He found, quite suddenly and just as he took a stool midway down the bar, that he had been vouchsafed a theme. A notion about the nature of things which he had been turning over in his mind for some time had become, without his ever choosing it, the theme of a book. It had "fallen into place", as it's put, like the tumblers of a lock which a safecracker listens to, and — so he experienced it — with the same small smooth sound.

The theme was the contrary pull men feel between Novelty and Security. Between boredom and adventure, between safety and dislocation, between the snug and the wild. Yes! Not only a grand human theme, but a truly mammalian theme, perhaps the only one. Curiosity killed the cat, we are warned, and warned with good reason, and yet we are curious. Cats could be a motif: cats asleep, taking their ease in that superlatively comfortable way they have, you feel drowsy and snug just watching them. Cats on the prowl, endlessly prying. Cats tiptoe-walking away from fear-some novelty, hair on fire and faces shocked. He chuckled, pleased with this, and lifted the glass that had been set before him. From the great window south light poured through the golden liquor, refracted delicately by ice.

The whole high front of the Seventh Saint Bar & Grill where he sat is of glass, floor to ceiling, a glass divided by vertical beams into a triptych and deeply tinted brown. During the day, nothing of the dimly-lit interior of the bar can be seen from the outside; walkers-by see only themselves, darkly; often they stop to adjust their clothing or their hair in what seems to them to be a mirror, or simply gaze at themselves in passing, momentarily but utterly absorbed, unaware that they are caught at it by watchers inside. (Or watcher, today, he being so far the bar's sole customer). Seen from the inside of the bar, the avenue, the stores opposite, the street glimpsed going off at right angles,

the trapezoid of sky visible above the lower buildings, are altered by the tinted windows into an elsewhere, oddly peaceful, a desert or the interior of the sea. Sometimes when he has fallen asleep face upward in the sun his dreams have taken on this quality of supernatural bright darkness.

Novelty and security. In fact *Novelty* wouldn't be a bad title. It had the grandness of abstraction, alerting the reader that large and thoughtful things were to be bodied forth. As yet he had no inkling of any incidents or characters that might occupy his theme; perhaps he never would. He could see though the book itself, he could feel its closed heft and see it opened, white pages comfortably large and shadowed grey by print; dense, numbered, full of meat. He sensed a narrative voice, speaking calmly and precisely, with immense assurance building, building; a voice too far off for him to hear, but speaking.

The door of the bar opened, showing him a momentary oblong of true daylight, blankly white. A woman entered. He couldn't see her face as she crossed to the bar in front of the window, but he could see, drawn with exactitude by the light behind her, her legs within a summery white dress. When young he had supposed, without giving it much thought, that women didn't realise that sun behind them revealed them in this way; now he supposes that of course they must, and thinks about it.

"Well, look who's here," said the bartender. "You off today?"

"I took off," she said, and as she took a seat between him and the window, he saw that she was known to him, that is, they had sat here in this relation before. "I couldn't stand it any more. What's tall and cool and not too alcoholic?"

"How about a spritzer?"

"Okay."

He caught himself staring fixedly at her, trying to

remember if they had spoken before, and she caught him too, raising her eyes to him as she lifted the pale drink to her lips, large dark eyes with startling whites; and looked away again quickly.

Where was he again? Novelty and security. He felt the feet of his attention skate out from under him in opposite directions. Should he make a note? He felt for the smooth shape of his pen in his pocket. "Theme for a novel: The contrary pull..." No. If this notion were real, he needn't make a note. A notion on which a note had to be made would be stillborn anyway, his notebook was a parish register of such, born and dead on the same page. Let it live if it can.

But had he spoken to her before? What had he said?

## II

When he was in college, a famous poet made a useful distinction for him. He had drunk enough in the poet's company to be compelled to describe to him a poem he was thinking of. It would be a monologue of sorts, the self-contemplation of a student on a summer afternoon who is reading *Euphues*. The poem itself would be a subtle series of euphuisms, translating the heat, the day, the student's concerns into symmetrical posies; translating even his contempt and boredom with that famously foolish book into a euphuism.

The poet nodded his big head in a sympathetic, rhythmic way as this was explained to him, and then told him that there are two kinds of poems. There is the kind you write; there is the kind you talk about in bars. Both kinds have value and both are poems; but it's fatal to confuse them.

In the Seventh Saint, many years later, it had struck him that the difference between himself and Shakespeare wasn't talent—not especially—but *nerve*. The capacity not to be frightened by his largest and most potent conceptions, to simply (simply!) sit down and execute them. The dreadful lassitude he felt when something really large and multifarious came suddenly clear to him, something Lear-sized yet sonnet-precise. If only they didn't rush on him whole, all at once, massive and perfect, leaving him frightened and nerveless at the prospect of articulating them word by scene by page. He would try to believe they were of the kind told in bars, not the kind to be written, though there was no way to be sure of this except to attempt the writing; he would raise a finger (the novelist in the bar mirror raising the obverse finger) and push forward his change. Wailing like a neglected ghost the vast notion would beat its wings into the void.

Sometimes it would pursue him for days and years as he fled desperately. Sometimes he would turn to face it, and do battle. Once or twice he had been victorious, objectively at least. Out of an immense concatenation of feeling, thought, word, and transcendent meaning had come his first novel, a slim, silent pageant of a book, tombstone for his slain conception. A publisher had taken it, gingerly; had slipped it quietly into the deep pool of spring releases, where it sank without a ripple, and where he supposes it lies still, its calm Bodoni gone long since green. A second, just as slim but more lurid, nightmarish even, about imaginary murders in an imaginary exotic locale, had been sold for a movie, though the movie had

never been made. He felt guilt for the producer's failure (which perhaps the producer didn't feel), having known the book could not be filmed; it could hardly be read; he had made a large sum, enough to finance years of this kind of thing, on a book whose first printing was largely returned.

His editor now and then took him to an encouraging lunch, and talked about royalties, advances, and upcoming titles, letting him know that whatever doubts he had she considered him a member of the profession and deserving of a share in its largesse and its gossip; at their last one, some months before, she had pressed him for a new book, something more easily graspable than his others. "A couple of chapters, and an outline," she said. "I could tell from that."

Well, he was sort of thinking of something, but it wasn't really shaping up, or rather it was shaping up rather like the others, into something indescribable at bottom... "What it would be," he said, timidly, "would be a sort of Catholic novel, about growing up Catholic," and she looked warily up at him over her Campari.

The first inkling of this notion had come to him the Christmas before, at his daughter's place in Vermont. On Christmas Eve, as indifferent evening took hold in the blue squares of the windows, he sat alone in the crepuscular kitchen, imbued with a profound sense of the identity of winter and twilight, of twilight and time, of time and memory, of his childhood and that Church which on this night waited to celebrate the second-greatest of its feasts. For a moment or an hour as he sat, become one with the blue of the snow and the silence, a congruity of star, cradle, winter, sacrament, self, it was as though he listened to a voice which had long been trying to catch his attention, to tell him Yes, this was the subject long withheld from him, which he now knew, and must eventually act on.

He had managed, though, to avoid it. He only brought it out now to please his editor, at the same time aware that it wasn't what she had in mind at all. But he couldn't do better; he had really only the one subject, if subject was the word for it, this idea of a notion or a holy thing growing clear in the stream of time, being made manifest in unexpected ways to an assortment of people: the revelation itself wasn't important, it could be anything, almost. Beyond that he had only one interest, the seasons, which he could describe endlessly and with all the passion of a country-bred boy grown old in the city. He was coming to doubt (he said) whether these were sufficient to make any more novels out of, though he knew that writers of genius had made great ones out of less. He supposed really (he didn't say) that he wasn't a novelist at all, but a failed poet, like a failed priest, one who had perceived that in fact he had no vocation, and had renounced his vows, and yet had found nothing at all else in the world worth doing when measured by the calling he didn't have, and went on through life fatally attracted to whatever of the sacerdotal he could find or invent in whatever occupation he fell into, plumbing or psychiatry or tending bar.

“Boring, boring, boring,” said the woman down the bar from him. “I feel like taking off for good.” Victor, the bartender, chin in his hand and elbow on the bar, looked at her with the remote sympathy of confessors and bartenders.

“Just take off,” she said.

“So take off,” Victor said. “Jeez, there’s a whole world out there.”

She made a small noise to indicate she doubted there was. Her brilliant eyes, roving over her prospects, fell on his where they were reflected in the bar mirror. She gazed at him but (he knew) didn’t see him, for she was looking within. When she did shift focus and understand she was being regarded, she smiled briefly, and glanced at his real person, and bent to her drink again. He summoned the bartender.

“Another, please, Victor.”

“How’s the writing coming?”

“Slowly. Very slowly. I just now thought of a new one, though.”

“Izzat so.”

It was so; but even as he said it, as the stirring-stick he had just raised out of his glass dripped whiskey drop by drop back into it, the older notion, the notion he had been unable at all adequately to describe to his editor, which he had long since dropped or thought he had dropped, stirred within him. Stirred, mightily, though he tried to shut doors on it; stirred, rising, and came forth suddenly in all the panoply with which he had forgotten it had come to be dressed, its facets glittering, windows opening on vistas, great draperies billowing. It seemed to have grown old in its seclusion but more potent, and fiercely reproachful of his neglect. Alarmed, he tried to shelter his tender new notion of Novelty and Security from its onrush, but even as he attempted this the old notion seized upon the new, and as he watched helplessly the two coupled in an utter ravishment and interlacement, made for each other, one thing now and more than twice as compelling as each had been before. “Jesus,” he said aloud; and then looked up, wondering if he had been heard. Victor and the woman were tête-à-tête, talking urgently in undertones.

## IV

“I know, I know,” he’d said, raising a hand to forestall his editor’s objection. “The Catholic Church is a joke. Especially the Catholic Church I grew up in...”

“Sometimes a grim joke.”

“And it’s been told a lot. The nuns, the weird rules, all that decayed scholastic guff. The prescriptions, and the proscriptions — especially the proscriptions, all so trivial when they weren’t hurtful or just ludicrous. But that’s not the way it’s perceived. For a kid, for me, the Church organized the whole world — not morally, either, or not especially, but in its whole nature. Even if the kid isn’t particularly moved by thoughts of God and sin — I wasn’t — there’s still a lot of Church left over, do you see? Because all the important things about the Church were real things: objects, places, words, sights, smells, days. The liturgical calendar. The Eastern church must be even more so.

For me, the Church was mostly about the seasons: it kept them in order. The Church was coextensive with the world.”

“So the kid’s point of view against...”

“No, no. What I would do, see, to get around this contradiction between the real Church and this other church I seemed to experience physically and emotionally, is to reimagine the Catholic Church as another kind of church altogether, a very subtle and wise church, that understood all these feelings; a church that was really — secretly — about these things in fact, and not what it seemed to be about; and then pretend, in the book, that the church I grew up in was that church.”

“You’re going to invent a whole new religion?”

“Well, not exactly. It would just be a matter of shifting emphasis, somehow, turning a thing a hundred and eighty degrees...”

“Well, how? Do you mean ‘books in the running brooks, sermons in stones’, that kind of thing? Pantheism?”

“No. No. The opposite. In that kind of religion the trees and the sky and the weather stand for God or some kind of supernatural unity. In my religion, God and all the rituals and sacraments would stand for the real world. The religion would be a means of perceiving the real world in a sacramental sky. A Gnostic ascension. A secret at the heart of it. And the secret is — everything. Common reality. The day outside the church window.”

“Hm.”

“That’s what it would really have been about from the beginning. And only seemed to be about these divine personages, and stuff, and these rules.”

She nodded slowly in a way that showed she followed him but frankly saw no novel. He went on, wanting at least to say it all before he no longer saw it with this clarity. “The priests and nuns would know this was the case, the wisest of them, and would guide the worshippers — the ones they thought could grasp it — to see through the paradox, to see that it is a paradox: that only by believing, wholly and deeply, in all of it could you see through it one day to what is real — see through Christmas to the snow; see through the fasting, and the saints’ lives, and the sins, and Baby Jesus walking through the snow every Christmas night ringing a little bell...”

“What?”

“That was a story one nun told. That was a thing she said was the case.”

“Good heavens. Did she believe it?”

“Who knows? That’s what I’m getting at.”

She broke into her eggs Florentine with a delicate fork. The two chapters, full of meat; the spinach of an outline. She was very attractive in a coltish, aristocratic way, with a framboise flush on her tanned cheeks that was just the flush his wife’s cheeks had had. No doubt still had; no doubt.

“Like Zen,” he said desperately. “As though it were a kind of Zen.”

## V

Well, he had known as well as she that it was no novel, no matter that it importuned him, reminding him often of its deep truth to his



experience, and suggesting shyly how much fun it might be to manipulate, what false histories he could invent that would account for the Church he imagined. But he had it now; now the world began to turn beneath him firmly, both rotating and revolving; it was quite clear now.

The theme would not be religion at all, but this ancient conflict between Novelty and Security. This theme would be embodied in the contrasted adventures of a set of characters, a family of Catholic believers modelled on his own. The *motion* of the book would be the sense of a holy thing ripening in the stream of time, that is, the seasons; and the *form* would be a false history or mirror-reversal of the world he had known and the Church he had believed in.

Absurdly, his heart had begun to beat fast. Not years from now, not months, very soon, imaginably soon, he could begin. That there was still nothing concrete in what he envisioned didn't bother him, for this scheme was one that would generate concreteness spontaneously and easily, he felt that. He had planted a banner amid his memories and imaginings, a banner to which they could all repair, to which they were repairing even now, primitive clans vivified by these colours, clamouring to be marshalled into troops by the captains of his art.

It would take a paragraph, a page, to eliminate, say, the Reformation, and thus make his Church infinitely more aged, bloated, old in power, forgetful of dogmas long grown universal and ignorable, dogmas altered by subtle subversives into their opposites, by a brotherhood within the enormous bureaucracy of faith, a brotherhood animated by a holy irony and secret as the Rosicrucians. Or contrariwise: he could pretend that the Reformation had been more nearly a complete success than it was, leaving his Roman faith a small, inward-turning, Gnostic sect, poor and not grand, guiltless of the Inquisition; its Pope itinerant, or in shabby exile somewhere (Douai, or Alexandria, or Albany); through Appalachia a poor priest travels from church to church, riding the circuit in an old Studebaker as rusty black as his cassock, putting up at a gaunt frame house on the outskirts of town, a convent. The wainscotted parlour is the nuns' chapel and the pantry is full of their canning; in autumn the broken stalks of corn wither in their kitchen garden. "Use it up, wear it out," says the proverb of their creed (and not that of splendid and orgulous Protestants), "make it do, do without"; and they possess themselves in edgeworn and threadbare Truth.

**Y**es! The little clapboard church in Kentucky where his family had worshipped, in the depression, amid the bumptious Baptists. In the hastening dawn he had walked a mile to serve six o'clock mass there. Introibo ad altare Dei. In winter the stove's smell was incense; in summer it was the damp odour of morning coming through the lancet windows, opened a crack to reveal a band of blue-green day beneath the feet of the saints fragily pictured there in imitation stained-glass. The three or four old Polish women always present always took Communion, their extended tongues trembling and their veined closed eyelids trembling too; and though when they rose crossing themselves they became only unsanctified old women again, he had for a moment glimpsed their clean pink

souls. There were aged and untended rose-bushes on the sloping lawn of the big gray house he had grown up in, his was by far the best-off of any family in that little parish, and when the roses bloomed in May the priest came and the familiar few they saw in Church each week gathered, and the Virgin was crowned there, a Virgin pink and blue and white as the rose-burdened day, the best lace tablecloth beneath her, strange to see that domestic lace outdoors edge-curling by odorous breezes and walked on by bugs. He caught himself singing:

O Mary we crown thee with blossoms today  
Queen of the Angels  
Queen of the May

Of course he would lose by this scheme a thousand other sorts of memories just as dear, would lose the grand and the fatuous Baroque, mitred bishops in encrusted copes and steel-rimmed eyeglasses; but the point was not nostalgia and self-indulgence after all, no, the opposite; in fact there ought to be some way of tearing the heart completely out of the old religion, or to conceive on it something so odd that no reader would ever confuse it with the original, except that it would be as concrete, its concreteness the same concreteness (which was the point...). And what then had been that religion's heart?

What if his Jesus hadn't saved mankind?

What if the Renaissance, besides uncovering the classical past, had discovered evidence, manuscripts, documentary proofs (incontrovertible, though only after terrible struggles) that Jesus had in the end refused to die on the cross? Had run away; had abjured his Messiah-hood; and left his followers then to puzzle that out. It would not have been out of cowardice, exactly, though the new New Testaments would seem to say so, but (so the apologetic would run) out of a desire to share our human life completely, even our common unheroic fate. For the true novelty, for God, would lie not in the redemption of men — an act he could perform with a millionth part of the creative effort he had expended in creating the world — but in being a human being entire, growing old and impotent to redeem anybody, including himself. Something like that had happened with the false messiah Sevi in the seventeenth century: his Messiah-hood spread quickly and widely through the whole Jewish world; then, at the last minute, threatened with death, he'd converted to Islam; his followers mostly fell away, but a few still believed, and their attempts to figure out how the Messiah could act in that strange way, redeem us by not redeeming us, yielded up the Hassidic sect, with its Kabbal and its paradoxical parables, almost Zenlike; very much what he had in mind for his church.

"A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" — the greatest grief, far greater than a few moments' glorious pain on that Tree. Mary's idea of it was that in the end the Father was unable to permit the death of his only-begotten son; the prophecy is Abraham and Isaac; she interceded for him, of course, her son too, as she still intercedes for each of us. Perhaps he resented it. In any case he outlived her, and his wife and son too; lived on, a retired carpenter, in his daughter's house; and the rabble came before his door, and mocked him, saying: *If thou art the Christ, take up thy cross.*

**W**eird! But, but — what made him chuckle and nearly smack his lips (in full boil now) — the thing would be, that his characters would pursue their different destinies *completely oblivious of all this oddity*, oblivious, that is, that it is odd; the narrative voice wouldn't notice it either; their Resurrection has always been this ambiguous one, this Refusal; their holy-card of Jesus in despised old age (after Murillo) has always marked the Sundays in their missals; their Church is just the old, the homely, the stodgy great Security, Peter's rock, which his was. His priest would venture out (bored, restless) from that security into the strange and the dangerous, at first only wishing to be a true priest, then for their own sakes, for the adventure of understanding. A nun: starting from a wild embracing of all experience, anything goes, she passes later into quietness and, well, into habit. His wife would have to sit for that portrait, of course, of course; though she wouldn't sit still. The two meet after long separation, only to pass each other at the X-point, coming from different directions, headed for different heavens — a big scene there. A saint: but which one? He or she? Well, that had always been the question; neither, or both, or one seeing at last after the other's death his sainthood, and advocating it (in the glum Vatican, a Victorian pile in Albany, the distracted Pope), a miracle awaited and given at last, unexpectedly, or not given, withheld, oh hold on, he asked, stop a minute, slow down... He plucked out and lit a cigarette with care. He placed his glass more exactly in the centre of its cardboard coaster, and arranged his change in orbits around it.

Flight over. Cats, though. He would appropriate for his Jesus that story about Muhammed called from his couch, tearing off his sleeve rather than disturbing the cat that had fallen asleep on it. A parable. Did Jews keep cats then? Who knows.

Oh God how subtle he would have to be, how cunning... No paragraph, no phrase even of the thousands the book must contain could strike a discordant note, be less than fully imagined, an entire novel's worth of thought would have to be expended on each one. His attention had only to lapse for a moment, between preposition and object, colophon and chapter heading, for dead spots to appear like gangrene which would rot the whole. Silkworms didn't work as finely or as patiently as he must, and yet boldness was all, the large stroke, the end contained in and prophesied by the beginning, the stains of his clouds infinitely various but all signifying sunrise. Unity in diversity, all that guff. An enormous weariness flew over him. The trouble with drink, he had long known, wasn't that it started up these large things but that it belittled the awful difficulties of their execution. He drank, gazed out into the false golden day where a passage of girl students in plaid uniforms was occurring, passing secret glances through the trick mirror of the window.

## VI

**"I**'m such a chicken," the woman said to Victor. "The other day they were going around at work signing people up for the softball team. I really wanted to play. They said come on, come on, it's no big deal, it's not professional or anything..."

"Sure, just fun."

"I didn't dare."

"What's to dare? Just good exercise. Fresh air."

"Sure, you can say that. You've probably been playing all your life." She stabbed at the last of her ice with a stirring stick. "I really wanted to, too. I'm such a chicken."

Play right field, he wanted to advise her. That had always been his retreat, nothing much ever happens in the right field, you're safe there mostly unless a left-handed batter gets up, and then if you blow one the shame is quickly forgotten. He told himself to say to her: *you should have volunteered for right field*. But his throat said it would refuse to do this, and his pleasantries would come out a muffled croak, watch out. She had finished her drink; how much time did he have to think of a thing to say to her? Buy her a drink: the sudden offer always made him feel like a masher, a cad, something antique and repellent.

"You should have volunteered for right field," he said.

"Oh, hi," she said. "How's the writing coming?"

"What?"

"The last time we talked you were writing a novel."

"Oh. Well, I sort of go in spurts." He couldn't remember still that he had ever talked with her, much less what imaginary novel he had claimed to be writing.

"It's like coming into a cave here," she said, raising her glass, empty now except for the rounded remains of ice. "You can't see anything for a while. Because of the sun in your eyes. I didn't recognise you at first." The ice she wanted couldn't escape from the bottom of the glass, so she shook the glass to free it, and slid ice into her mouth; she crunched it heedlessly (a long time since he'd been able to do that) and drew her skirt away from the stool beside her, which he had come to occupy.

"Will you have another?"

"No, nope." They smiled at each other, each ready to go on with this if the other could think of something to go on with.

"So," he said.

"Taking a break?" she said. "Do you write every day?"

"Oh, no, Oh, I sort of try. I don't work very hard, really. Really, I'm on vacation. All the time. Or you could say I work all the time too. It comes to the same thing." He'd said all this before, to others; he wondered if he'd said it to her. "It's like weekend homework. Remember? There wasn't ever a time you absolutely had to do it — there was always Saturday, then Sunday — but then there wasn't ever a time it wasn't there to do, too."

"How awful."

Sunday dinner's rich odour declining into stale left-overhood: was it that incense that made Sunday Sunday, or what? For there was no part of Sunday which was not Sunday; even if rebelling, you changed from Sunday suit to Saturday jeans when dinner was over, they felt not like a second skin, like a bold animal's useful hide, as they had the day before, but strange, all right but wrong to flesh chafed by wool, the flannel shirt too smooth, too indulgent after the starched white. And upstairs — though you kept as far from them as possible, that is, face down full length on the parlour carpet, head inches from the funnies — the books and blue-lined paper waited.

"It must take a lot of self-discipline," she said.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't have much." He felt himself about to say again, and unable to resist saying, that "Dumas, I think it was Dumas, some terrifically prolific Frenchman, said that writing novels is a simple matter — if you write one page a day, you'll write one novel a year; two pages a day, two novels a year; three pages, three novels, and so on. And how long does it take to cover a page with writing? Twenty minutes? An hour? So you see. Very easy really."

"I don't know," she said, laughing. "I can't even bring myself to write a letter."

"Oh, now that's hard." Easiest to leave it all just as it had been, and only inveigle into it a small sect of his own making...easiest of all just to leave it. It was draining from him, like the suits of the bathing beauties pictured on trick tumblers, to opposite effect. Self-indulgence only, nostalgia, pain of loss for what had not ever been worth saving: the self-indulgence of a man come to that time when the poignance of memory is his sharpest sensation, grown sharp as the others grew blunt. The journey now quite obviously more than half over, it had begun to lose interest; only the road already travelled still seemed full of promise. Promise! Odd word. But there it was. He blinked, and, having fallen rudely silent, said "Well, well, well."

"Well," she said. She had begun to gather up the small habitation she had made before her on the bar, purse and open wallet, folded newspaper, a single unblown rose he hadn't noticed her bring in. "I'd like to read your book some time."

"Sure," he said. "It's not very good. I mean it has some nice things in it, it's a good little story. But it's nothing really."

"I'm sure it's terrific." She spun the rose beneath her nose and alighted from her stool.

"I happen to have a lot of copies. I'll give you one."

"Good. Got to go."

On her way past him, she gave the rose to Victor without any other farewell. Once again sun described her long legs as she crossed the floor (sun lay on its boards like gilding, sun was impartial) and for a moment she paused, sun-blinded maybe, in the garish lozenge of real daylight made when she opened the door. Then she reappeared in the other afternoon of the window. She raised her hand in a command, and a cab the colour of marigolds appeared before her as though conjured. A flight of pigeons, seeming stationary like a sculpted frieze, filled up the window for an instant and then just as instantly didn't fill it up any more.

"Crazy," Victor said.

"Hm?"

"Crazy broad." He gestured with the rose toward the vacant window. "My wife. You married?"

"I was. Like the pumpkin eater." Handsome guy, Victor, in a brutal, black-Irish way. Like most New York bartenders, he was really an actor, or was it the reverse.

"Divorced?"

"Separated."

He tested his thumb against the pricks of the rose. "Women. They say you got all the freedom. Then you give them their freedom, and they don't want it."

He nodded, though it wasn't the wisdom that his

own case would have yielded up. He was only glad now not to miss her any longer; and, now and then, sad that he was glad. The last precipitate was that occasionally when a woman he'd been looking at, on a bus, in a bar, got up to leave, passing away from him for good, he felt a shooting pang of loss absurd on the face of it.

Volunteer, he thought, but for right field. And if standing there you fall into a reverie, and the game in effect goes on without you, well, you knew it would when you volunteered for the position. Only once every few innings the lost — the not even noticed till too late — fly ball makes you sorry that things are as they are and not different, and you wonder if people think you might be bored and indifferent out there, contemptuous even, which isn't the case at all...

"On the house," Victor said, and rapped his knuckles lightly on the bar.

"Oh, hey, thanks." Kind Victor, though the glass put before him contained a powerful solvent, he knew that even as he raised the glass to his lips. He could still fly, oh yes, always, though the cost would be terrible. But what was it he fled from? Self-indulgence, memory dearer to him than any adventure, solitude, lapidary-work in his very own mines...what could be less novel, more secure? And yet it seemed dangerous; it seemed he hadn't the nerve to face it; he felt unarmed against it.

Novelty and security: the security of novelty, the novelty of security. Always the full thing, the whole subject, the true subject, stood just behind the one you found yourself contemplating. The trick, but it wasn't a trick, was to take up at once the thing you saw and the reason you saw it as well; to always bite off more than you could chew, and then chew it. If it were self-indulgence for him to cut and polish his semi-precious memories, and yet seem like danger, like a struggle he was unfit for, then self-indulgence was a potent force, he must examine it, he must reckon with it.

And he would reckon with it: on that last Sunday in Advent, when his story was all told, the miracle granted or refused, the boy would lift his head from the books and blue-lined paper, the questions that had been set for him answered, and see that it had begun to snow.

Snow not falling but flying sideways, and sudden, not signalled by the slow curling of clouds all day and a flake or two drifting downward but rushing forward all at once as though sent for. (The blizzard of '36 had looked like that). And filling up the world's concavities, pillowing up in the gloaming, making night light with its whiteness, and then falling still in everyone's dreams, falling for pages and pages; steeping (so an old man would dream in his daughter's house) the gaunt frame convent on the edge of town, and drifting up even to the eyes of the martyrs pictured on the sash windows of the little clapboard church, Our Lady of the Valley; the wind full of howling white riders tearing the shingles from the roof, piling the snow still higher, blizzarding the church away entirely and the convent too and all the rest of it, so that by next day oblivion whiter than the hair of God would have returned the world to normality, covering his false history and all its works in the deep ordinariness of

two feet of snow; and at evening the old man in his daughter's house would sit looking out over the silent calm alone at the kitchen table, a congruence of star, cradle, season, sacrament etc., end of chapter thirty-five, the next page a fly-leaf with a note about the type.

The whole thing, the full thing, the step taken backward which frames the incomprehensible as in a window. *Novelty*: there was, he just then saw, a pun in the title.

He rose, Victor, lost in thought, watched the hurrying crowds that had suddenly filled the streets, afternoon gone, none with time to glance at themselves; hurrying home. One page a day, seven a week, thirty or thirty-one to the month. Fishing in his pocket for a tip, he came up with his pen, a thick black fountain pen. Fountain: it seemed less flowing, less forthcoming than that, in shape more like a bullet or a bomb.

**John Crowley** has been acclaimed for his strikingly original fantasy novel *Little, Big* (1981). He is also the author of three science-fiction novels: *The Deep* (1975), *Beasts* (1976) and *Engine Summer* (1979).

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# John Shirley

## What Cindy Saw

The people from the clinic were very nice. Of course, they lived on the shell, and people who lived on the shell often behaved nicely, and with uniformity of purpose, like the little magnetically-moved toy players on an electric football game. They seemed very sincere, and they had a number of quirky details making them ever so much more realistic. The way Doctor Gainsborough was always plucking things from the corner of his eye, for example. And the way Nurse Rebeck was forever rubbing her crusty red nose and complaining of allergies.

Doctor Gainsborough admitted, with every appearance of sincerity, that, yes, life was mysterious and ultimately Cindy might well be right about the way things were under what she called "the shell". Doctor Gainsborough couldn't be sure that she was wrong — but, Cindy, they said, we have our doubts, serious doubts, and we would like you to consider our doubts, and our reasoning, and give our viewpoint a chance. Doctor Gainsborough had known Cindy would respond to his pretence of politely considering her ideas. Cindy was, after all, fairminded.

And she simply refused to respond at all when people told her she was crazy and seeing things.

Yes, Cindy, Doctor Gainsborough said, you could be right. But still, we have severe doubts, so it's best that we keep up the treatments. All right?

All right, Doctor Gainsborough.

So they'd given her the stelazine and taught her how to make jewellery. And she stopped talking about the shell, after a while. She became the clinic's pet. It was Doctor Gainsborough himself who took her home, after "just three months this time, and no shock treatments". He let her off in front of her parents' house, and she reached in through the car window to shake his hand. She even smiled. He smiled back and crinkled his blue eyes, and she straightened, and took her hand back, and stepped onto the kerb. He was pulled away down the street; pulled away by the car he drove. She was left with the house. She knew she was

turning toward the house. She knew she was walking towards it. She knew she was climbing the steps. But all the time she felt the pull. The pull from the shell was so subtle that you could think: *I know I'm turning and walking and climbing*, when all the time you weren't. You were being pulled through all those motions, so it wasn't you doing it at all.

But best you think it's you.

She had practised it, that steering amongst the obstacle course of the mind's free associations. She did it now, and she managed to suppress her sense of the pull.

She felt fine. She felt fine because she felt nothing. Nothing much. Just...just normal. The house looked like a house, the trees looked like trees. Picture book house, picture book trees. The house seemed unusually quiet, though. No one home? And where was Doobie? The dog wasn't tied up out front this time. She'd always been afraid of the Doberman. She was relieved he was gone. Probably gone off with the family.

She opened the door — funny, their not being home and leaving the door unlocked. It wasn't like Dad. Dad was paranoid. He even admitted it. "I smoke Paranoid Pot," he said. He and Mom smoked pot and listened to old Jimi Hendrix records and screwed listlessly on the sofa, when they thought Cindy was asleep.

"Hello? Dad? Mom?" Cindy called, now. No answer.

Good. She felt like being at home alone. Playing a record, watching TV. Nothing to cope with. No random factors, or scarcely any. And none that weren't harmless. Watching TV was like looking into a kaleidoscope: it was constantly shifting, going through its motions with its own style of intricacy, but there was never anything really unexpected. Or almost never. Once Cindy had turned it on and watched a Japanese monster movie. And the Japanese monster movie had been too much like a caricature of the shell. Like they were mocking her by showing what they knew. What they

knew she knew.

Now, she told herself. Think about now. She turned from the entry-hall to the archway opening into the living room.

**I**n the living room was what looked very much like a sofa. If it had been in the rec-room of the clinic she'd have been quite sure it was a sofa. Here, though, it sat corpulent and dusty bluegrey in the twilight of the living room, scrolled arm-rests a little too tightly wound; it sprawled ominously in the very centre of the room. There was something unnatural in its texture. It had a graininess she'd never noticed before. Like one of those ugly, irregular scraps of jelly-fish at the seashore, a membranous thing whose stickiness has given it a coating of sand.

Even more disorienting was the sofa-thing's ostensibly familiar shape. It was shaped like a sofa. But there was something bloated about it, something tumescent. It was just a shade bulkier than it should have been. As if it were swollen from eating.

So that's their secret, she thought. It's the sofa. Normally I don't notice anything unusual about it—because normally I don't catch it just after it has eaten.

She wondered who it had eaten. One of her sisters? The house was silent. Maybe it had eaten the whole family. But then Mother had said that they wouldn't be home when she got there: she remembered now. One of the nurses had told Doctor Gainsborough. Sometimes the stelazine made Cindy forget things.

They had gone out to dinner. They wanted to go out to dinner, probably, one last time before Cindy came home. It was embarrassing to go out to dinner with Cindy. Cindy had a way of denouncing things. "You're always denouncing things, Cindy," Dad said. "You ought to mellow out. You're a pain in the ass when you do that shit." Cindy would denounce the waitress, and then maybe the tables, the tablecloths, the folds in the tablecloth. "It's the symmetry in the checker-pattern on the table that reveals the deception," she would say earnestly, like a TV commentator talking about communist terrorism. "This constant imposition of symmetrical pattern is an attempt to delude us into a sense of a harmony with our environment that isn't there at all."

"I know you're precocious, Cindy," her Dad would say, brushing crumbs of French bread from his beard or maybe tugging on one of his ear-rings, "but you're still a pain in the ass."

"It could be," Cindy said aloud to the sofa, "that you've eaten one of my sisters. I don't really mind that. But I must hastily and firmly assure you that you are not going to eat me."

Still, she wanted to find out more about the sofa-thing. Cautiously.

She went to the kitchen, fetched a can-opener and a flashlight, and returned to the living room.

She shone the light on the thing that sat on the polished wooden parquet floor.

**T**he sofa-thing's legs, she saw now, were clearly fused to the floor: they seemed to be growing out of it. Cindy nodded to herself. What she was seeing was a kind of blossom. It must have roots far underground.

It quivered, self-consciously in the beam of her

flashlight.

With the flashlight in her left hand — she could have turned on the overhead light, but she knew she'd need the flashlight for the caverns under the shell — she approached the sprawling, bluegrey thing, careful not to get too close. In her right hand was the can-opener.

All the while, she seemed to hear a backseat driver saying: This isn't part of the programme. You should go upstairs and watch TV and move from moment to moment thinking safely, steering around the obstacles, turning the wheel away from the dangerous clumps of association, pretending you don't know what you know.

But it was too late, her stelazine was nearly worn off and the couch had startled her into a wrong turn, and now she was on a side road in a foreign suburb and she didn't know the route back to the familiar highway. There were no policemen she might ask, no mental cops like Doctor Gainsborough.

So Cindy crept toward the sofa-thing. She decided that the sofa couldn't hurt her unless she sat on it. If you sat on it, it would curl up, enfold you. Venus flytrap.

She knelt by its legs. Sensing her intent, it bucked a little, dust rising from its cushions. It contracted, the cushions humping. It made an awful sound.

She began to work on its legs, where they joined the floor. For thirty-eight minutes she worked busily with the can-opener.

The sofa-thing made a series of prolonged, piteous sounds. Her arm ached, but the can-opener was surprisingly sharp. Soon she had the cavity under the sofa partly exposed; you could see it under the flap-edge of the shell. Cindy took a deep breath, and prised the flap so it opened wider. It was dark in there. Musky smell; musky and faintly metallic, like lubricant for a motor. And a faint under-scent of rot.

By degrees, working hard, she rolled back the skin of the floor around the sofa. Nature was ingenious; the skin had looked like a hardwood parquet floor till now. It had been hard and solid and appropriately grained. Marvellous camouflage. The skin was hard — but not as hard as it looked. You could peel it back like the bark of a tree, if you were patient and didn't mind aching fingers. Cindy didn't mind.

The sofa-thing's keening rose to a crescendo, so loud and shrill Cindy had to move back and clap her hands over her ears.

And then, the sofa folded in on itself. Its sirening folded too, muffled like a scream trying to escape from a hand clamped over a small child's mouth.

The sofa was like a sea anemone closing up; it deflated, shrank, vanished, sucked down into a dark wound in the centre of the living room floor. The house was quiet once more.

Cindy shone the flashlight into the wound. It was damp, oozing, red flecked with yellow. The house's blood didn't gush, it bled in droplets, like perspiration. The thick, vitreous underflesh shuddered and drew back when she prodded it with her can-opener.

She tucked the can-opener into her boot, and knelt by the wound for a better look. She shone the flashlight's beam into the deepness, into the secret, into the undershell. . .

The house supposedly had no basement. Neverthe-



*Candy Sorace '83*

less, beneath the living room floor was a chamber. It was about the same size as the living room. Its walls were gently concave and slickly wet—but not organic. The wetness was a kind of machine lubrication. In the centre of the cable was a column, the understem of the creature that had masqueraded as her house. The column, she reflected, was actually more of a stalk; a thick stalk made of cables. Each cable was thick as her Dad's forearm, and they wound about one another like the strands in a powerline. The sofa must have been sucked into its natural hiding place, compressed within the stalk.

She wondered why the house hadn't struck till today...Why hadn't it got them all while they were sleeping? But probably the undershell people, the programmers, hadn't bred it to be a ravenous, unselective carnivore. It was there for the elimination of *select* people—she realised this must be the explanation for the disappearance of their houseguests. Mom had brought four houseguests home in the last two years, bedded each one on the sofa, and each of them hadn't been there for breakfast. Awfully curious, awfully coincidental, Cindy had thought, every houseguest deciding to leave the house before breakfast. Now Cindy knew that they hadn't left the house at all. They'd become part of it. Probably that was what had happened to Doobie—Mom usually wouldn't let him sleep in the house, and never allowed him up on the sofa. But her sister Belinda sometimes let Doobie in after Mom had gone to bed; the dog must have snuck onto the sofa for a nap, the sofa's genetically programmed eating hour had come around, and it had done to Doobie what a sea anemone does to a minnow. Enfolded, paralysed, and digested him.

Cindy didn't mind. She'd always hated Doobie.

She lay face down, peering into the gap in the house's skin. The under-floor was about fourteen feet beneath her. She considered dropping to the sub-world, to explore. Cindy shook her head. Best go for help. Show them what she'd found.

A funny feeling in her stomach warned her to look up...

**T**he living room archway was gone. It had sealed off. The windows were gone. A sort of scar tissue had grown over them. She had alarmed the creature, cutting into it. So it had trapped her.

Cindy made a small, high 'Uh!' sound in her throat. The walls were bending inward. She stood, and went to the nearest wall, pressed her hands flat against it. It should have felt like hard plaster, but it depressed under her fingers, taking her handprint like clay. Softening. The house would ooze in on her, collapsing on itself like a hill in an L.A. mudslide, and it would pulp her and squeeze the juices from her and drink.

She turned to the gap she'd made in the floor. Its edges were curling up like paper becoming ash. But it was closing, too. She got a good grip on the flashlight, knelt, and wriggled through the opening, dropping to the floor below. The impact stung the balls of her feet.

Cindy straightened, breathing hard, and looked around.

Tunnels opened from the chamber on both sides, stretching as far as she could see to the right and left. She stepped into the right-hand tunnel. The ceiling was just two feet overhead; it was curved and smooth.

She walked slowly, feeling her way with one hand, shining her flashlight beam at the floor. The darkness was rich with implications, and Cindy felt her nerve falter. She had a vice-squeezing sensation at her temples, and a kind of greasy electricity in her tongue. She tried to picture the flashlight's beam as a raygun's laser, straight and brightly furious, burning the darkness away—but the light was weak, and set only a small patch of the darkness afire. Gradually, though, her eyes adjusted, and the darkness seemed less dense, less oppressively pregnant, the flashlight beam no longer important. At intervals the oblong of light picked out what looked like transparent fishing lines passing from floor to ceiling. The plastic wires came in irregularly-spaced sheaves of eight or nine. Sometimes there was hardly room to squeeze between them. Then, she'd sidle through, twisting this way and that. When she brushed a wire, it would resonate like a guitar string, but with an overtone to its hum that was like the call of a desert insect. She sensed, somehow, that the wires had to do with events in the upper world. They certainly weren't installed by the utility company, she said to herself.

She came to a place where the wall was transparent in a patch big as her two hands put together. It was a little cloudy, but Cindy could see through it into another chamber; two men sat in the chamber at a metal card-table. They were playing cards, the little white rectangles in their hands marked with mazes and mandalas instead of the usual kings and queens and jacks and spades. Each man was hunched over his hand, deep in concentration. One sat with his back to her. He was the smaller man; he had grey hair. The other was a round-faced man; stocky, a little overweight, his brown beard streaked with white. The bigger man wore a rumpled jacket and trousers of a contemporary cut; the other wore a threadbare suit many decades outdated. The room looked like a jail cell. There were two bunks, a toilet, trays of half-eaten food, empty beer-cans lying about under the table. "It's you bid, Mister Fort," said the bearded man, with humorous formality. "Right you are, Mister Dick," said the other man lightly. He slapped a card face-up on the table and said, "M.C. Escher against Aztec Maze." The other man sighed. "Ah, you've locked again. You win. It's not fair: you had decades to practise, playing against Bierce...Dammit I wish they'd let us smoke..."

Cindy banged on the glass, and shouted, but she couldn't make them hear her. Or perhaps they pretended not to. She shrugged, and went on.

Another ten strides onward, something glimmered on the left, reflecting her flashlight's beam. It was a long, vertical, rectangular mirror, set flush into the wall. The mirror distorted Cindy's reflection, making her seem ludicrously elongated. She reached out to touch it, and accidentally brushed one of the wires; the transparent wire thrummed and her image in the mirror shimmered, vibrating in and out of visibility in a frequency sympathetic to the wire's quivering. She struck the wire again, harder, to see what it would do to the image in the mirror. Her reflection fluttered and vanished, and in its place was a flickering image of the upper world. A mundane street scene, children walking home from school, cars honking impatiently behind a slow-moving Volkswagen Rabbit driven by an elderly



lady....

On a hunch, a hunch that became an impulse, Cindy struck the tunnel wires repeatedly, as hard as she could.

The mirror — really a kind of TV monitor — showed the traffic careening out of control, the VW Rabbit backing up at great speed, ploughing into the others, the children losing control of their limbs and flapping haphazardly at one another.

Cindy giggled.

She took the can-opener from her boot and slashed at the wires, watching the "mirror" all the while. The strings parted with a protesting *whang*. And in the upper world: children exploded, cars began to wrap around one another, suddenly becoming soft and pliable, tying themselves round telephone poles...a great invisible current swept the street, washing the buildings away....

Cindy smiled and went her way down the tunnel, randomly snipping wires.

**E**very few hundred yards she came to an intersection of tunnels; three opening to the right, three to the left, her own continuing on ahead. Sometimes Cindy changed direction at these subworld crossroads, following her intuition, vaguely aware that she had a specific destination.

At length the tunnel opened out into a circular room in the centre of which was another thick, red-yellow stalk; a corded, man-thick stalk, grown up to merge with the ceiling. But here, the walls swarmed with what looked like oversized aphids. Mechanical aphids, each big as her hand, and the colour of a blue-metal razor blade. They clung to the walls in groups of twenty or thirty, only a hand's width between each group; the aphids crawled methodically on small metal legs thin and numerous as the bristles of a hairbrush; on the right-hand wall they swarmed between banks of TV monitors. She switched off her flashlight; there was enough light from the TV screens. Standing at the monitors, spaced more or less evenly, were a score of dusty blue fellows, vaguely human, wearing jumpsuits of newspaper. Looking closer, Cindy could see that the newspaper-print was in some kind of inscrutable cipher, quite unreadable. And the newsphotos showed only half-recognisable silhouettes.

For the first time, real uneasiness shivered up in her, and bits and pieces of fear, like irregular hailstones, rattled down through the chill focal-heart of her sensations.

Fear because: the men at the monitors were entirely without mouths, without noses, without ears. Each had only large, blinking, watery grey eyes. And fear because: with Cindy's arrival in the room, the aphids, if that's what they were, began to move feverishly — but somehow purposefully — in mandala patterns over the walls, rustling through a thick coating of shag-rug cilia; the cilia, she saw now, covered the walls everywhere. It was the colour of a throat with a bad cold.

The mouthless men used three-fingered hands to manipulate knobs on the frames of the TV monitors. Now and then one of them reached up and brushed an aphid; something in the touch galvanized the creature so that it scurried furiously up the wall, parting the cilia and altering the symmetrical patterns made by

the collective motion of the other aphids.

The TV pictures were black-and-white. The floor was alabaster, patterned with inset silver wires; the wires were arcanely configured, and occasionally sparked at the touch of the metal shod feet of the almost-people.

Cindy had decided to call them almost-people.

Her eyes adjusted to the dim light, and she saw that in the small of each almost-person's back was an umbilicus. The long, attenuated black umbilicus drooped, then rose to attach to the base of the thick red-yellow stalk in the centre of the chamber, much as a May Day reveller's ribbon attaches to a maypole. Cindy supposed that the umbilici made mouths and noses unnecessary for the almost-people.

Cindy was afraid, but that always put her on the offensive. Take control, she told herself.

So just to see what would happen, she went about the room and — with her can-opener — methodically clipped the umbilici severing the almost-people from the stalk.

The almost-people stopped what they were doing; they turned and looked at her.

Cindy wondered how they felt. Were they alarmed or surprised or outraged or hurt? She couldn't tell.

One by one they fell, clutching their spindly throats. They writhed and twitched, making the wire-patterns on the floor spit blue sparks, and Cindy supposed that they were choking to death.

She felt a little sorry this time. She even said so. "Oh, I'm sorry."

After a few minutes, they stopped moving. Their big eyes shut. Breathing shakily, Cindy stepped over the corpses and went to one of the TV screens. She was careful not to step on the silver wires in the floor; she was sure she'd be electrocuted if she did.

**T**he TV screens monitored life on the upper world. Reticulating charcoal-and-chalk video images of houses and motels and traffic and dogs. Junkyards. Traffic lights changing. Farms. Seaside resorts. Canadian hikers. Rock singers. A teenage boy with stringy blond hair and a thin chest shakily trying to fill a syringe from a rusty spoon. Jazz players. Masturbating children. Masturbating women. Masturbating monkeys. She gazed for a while at a TV showing two people copulating in a hotel room. They were both middle-aged and rather doughy. The man's hair was thinning, and his paunch waggled with his hip-motions; the woman's hair was as defined and permanent in shape as a hat. A bell-shaped hat.

Impulsively, Cindy reached out and twiddled the monitor's unmarked black-plastic knobs. The picture shimmered, changed: the woman's head warped, bent out of shape, reified — it had become the head of a chimpanzee. The man screamed and disengaged and backed away. The woman clawed at herself.

Cindy made a moue with her lips, and tilted her head.

She reached up and prodded a number of the metallic aphids with her can-opener. They scurried, frightened at the unfamiliar touch, and set the others to scurrying more frantically, till the thousands of aphids clinging to the rounded ceiling were reshaping in the cilia in swarming hysteria, their symmetry of pattern obliterated.

Cindy looked at the TV monitors. Now they showed only crowd scenes. People at football games, looking confused and distressed, as if they'd all gone blind and deaf; they staggered into one another, arms flailing, or tripped, went tumbling down the grandstands, upsetting other people — but, as Cindy watched, the people began to move cohesively down toward the playing field. They streamed onto the field, crowding it, and began to arrange themselves according to the dictates of a spontaneously reconceived psychic schema: people wearing white or yellow shirts moved together, people with dark shirts congregated, till the bird's eye view of the stadium showed the crowd spelling out words with their re-ordered colour scheme. They spelled out:

ZEITGEIST  
and then  
LOVE TIMES DEATH EQUALS ACTION  
and then  
LACEWORK REBELLION

...Cindy turned away. She approached the stalk in the centre of the room. With the can-opener stuck in her teeth, she began to climb. The going was slippery, but she was determined, and soon reached the ceiling. Arms and legs aching, she clung there and, with one hand, began to carve an opening.

The skin parted more easily from the underside. Ten minutes of painful toil and the gap was wide enough to climb through. Cindy dropped the can-opener and wormed her way upward, through the wound in the ceiling.

She broke through a second layer, gnawing with her teeth, coming up through the skin of another seeming-floor.

She found herself under what looked like an ordinary four-legged wooden table. Around her were four empty wooden chairs, and a white floor-length tablecloth.

She dragged herself out of the wet, shuddering gap, and onto the floor. Gasping, she pressed aside the tablecloth, which had so far concealed her from those outside, and crawled into the upper world, once more atop the shell.

**S**he was in a restaurant. Mom and Dad and Belinda and Barbara sat at the next table.

They stared at her, open-mouthed. "What the

hell have you got all over you, Cindy?" her father asked. The girls looked a little sick.

Cindy was coated with the wetness, the stickiness, the halfblood death essence of underplace things.

Still breathing hard, her head pounding, Cindy reached down and lifted the tablecloth aside, revealing the ragged, oozing wound she'd crawled out of. This time, her family saw it too.

Her father got up from the table rather convulsively, so that he nearly upset it, and his wineglass splashed Mom's dress. He turned away and, fumbling for his pot-pouch, staggered toward the exit. Her sisters had covered their eyes. They sobbed. Her Mother was staring at her. Mom's face was changing; the eyes growing bigger, the lips vanishing, her skin going dusty-blue. So, then. Her mother was the one they'd planted in the family. "They're not under every house," Cindy tried to explain to her sisters. "They aren't always there to find. You might dig under our house and not find it — you have to know how to look. Not where to look. They keep us blinded with false symmetries."

Her sisters followed their father outdoors.

Cindy turned away. "Fuck them all, then," she said. She felt her Mother's subworld eyes on her back as she fell to her knees and crawled back under the table. She slid feet-first into the wound, and dropped into the room below. She searched through the monitors, and found a screen showing her Dad and her sisters getting into the car. She turned the knobs, and laughed, seeing the car rising into the sky like a helium balloon with the string cut, turning end over end, Belinda spilling out of it and falling, her father screaming as the car deliquesced, becoming a huge drop of mercury that hung in the air and then burst into a thousand glittering droplets falling to spatter the parking lot with argent toxicity.

**John Shirley**, an American who has recently been resident in France, is author of *City Come a'Walkin'* (1980) and other novels.

## BACK ISSUES

If you have lately come to *Interzone*, you will be pleased to know that back-issues of numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4 are still available at £1.25 each from 21 The Village Street, Leeds, LS4 2PR. Make your cheques payable to *Interzone*, and hurry!

## COMING NEXT ISSUE

A delightful tale by new writer Neil Ferguson, set in an alternate world where — surprise, surprise — a movie star becomes President of the United States! Also coming soon: a new story by Keith Roberts, whose "Kitemaster" (*Interzone* 1) gained the BSFA award as best short story of 1982.

# *Strange Great Sins*

M. John Harrison



**"T**his mite's sins are nothing to some I've had to swallow," boasted the sin-eater. He was a dark, energetic man of middle height and years, always nodding his head, rubbing his hands or shifting his weight from one foot to the other, anxious to put the family at their ease. "They'll taste of vanilla and honey compared to some."

No-one answered him, and he seemed to accept this readily enough — he had, after all, been privy in his life to a great deal of grief. He looked out of the window. The tide was ebbing, and the air was full of fog which had blown in from the sea. All along Henrietta Street, out of courtesy to the bereaved family, the doors and windows were open, the mirrors covered and the fires extinguished. Frost and fog, and the smell of the distant shore: not much to occupy him. The sin-eater breathed into his cupped hands, coughed suddenly, yawned.

"I like a wind that blows off the land myself," he said.

He went and looked down at the little girl. They had laid her out two hours ago, on a bed with a spotless blue and white cover, and placed on her narrow chest a dish of salt. Gently he tapped with an outstretched finger the rim of this dish, tilting his head to hear the clear small ringing noise which was produced.

"I've been in places where they make linen garlands," he said, "and decorate them with white paper roses. Then they hang white gloves from them, one glove for each year of the kiddie's age, and keep them in the church until they fall to pieces." He nodded his head. "That's how I think of children's sins," he said. "White gloves hanging in a church."

Imagining instead perhaps the narrow cemetery behind the dunes, entered through its curious gateway formed of two huge curved whalebones, imagining perhaps the sea-holly, the gulls, and the blowing sand which covers everything, the girl's mother began to cry. The rest of the family stared helplessly at her. There was another, idiot, daughter who kicked her heels at the table and threw the scissors into the empty grate. The father, an oldish man who delivered mackerel in a cart along the Fish Road to Eame, Child's Ercall and sometimes as far as Sour Bridge, said dully: "She were running about yesterday as happy as you please. She were always running, happy as you please." He had repeated this every half-hour or so since the sin-eater's arrival, shaking his head as if in his simple pleasure at her happiness he had somehow missed a vital clue which would have enabled him to prevent her death (or at least comprehend it). His wife touched his sleeve, rubbing her eyes and trying to smile.

**I**t was a long vigil, as they always are. Towards morning the sin-eater heard a sound of muffled revelry in the street outside: stifled laughter, the rattle of a tambourine quickly stilled, the scrape of clogs on the damp cobbles. When he looked out he could see several dim figures moving backwards and forwards in the sea-fog. He blinked. He narrowed his eyes and cleaned the window pane with the flat of his hand. Behind him he heard the child's father get to his feet with a deep sigh. Turning back into the room he said, "They've brought the horse over from Shifnal, I think. Unless you've got one in the village."

The old man stared at him, at first without seeming to understand, then with growing anger; while outside they began to sing:

*Mari Lwyd  
Horse of frost & fire  
Horse which is not a horse  
Look kindly on our celebration.*

The pallid skull of the Mari could now be seen, bobbing up and down on its pole, clacking its lower jaw energetically as the wind opened the fog up into streaming ribbons and tatters then closed it again, white and seamless like a sheet.

"Let us in and give us some beer," called a muffled but derisive voice. The idiot daughter gave a smile of delight and stared round the room as if she had heard a cupboard or a table speak; she tilted her head and whispered. There was a clatter of hooves or clogs, or perhaps it was simply the clapping of hands. The Mari's followers were dressed in rags. They danced in the fog and frost, their breath itself a fog. The masks they wore were meant to represent the long strange lugubrious head of the wasteland locust, that enormous insect which lives in the blowing sand and clinging mud of the Great Brown Desert.

"I'll give you more than beer!" shouted the old man, his face congested with his powerful frustration and grief. "I'll give you something you won't like!" He pulled the sleeves of his shirt up above his elbows; and before his wife could stop him he had rushed out among the Mari-boys, kicking and punching. They evaded him with deft hops and skips, and ran away laughing into the mist; the idiot daughter murmured and bit her nails; the door banged emptily back and forth in the wind. The old man had to come back into the house, shamed and defeated.

"Leave them be," said his wife. "They're not worth it, that lot from up at Shifnal."

Distantly the voices still sang,

*Mari Lwyd  
Falls between the day and the hour  
Horse which is not a horse  
Look kindly on our feast.*

The sin-eater made himself comfortable by the window again. He scratched his head. Something in the foggy street had stirred his memory. "The horse which is not a horse," he whispered dreamily.

He smiled.

"Oh no," he said to the old man and his wife, "your little girl's sins will be like the coloured butterflies — compared to some I've tasted." And then again: "The horse which is not a horse. I never hear those words without a shudder. Have you ever been to Viriconium? Packed your belongings aboard some barge at the ruined wharfs of the Yser Canal? Watched two clouds close a slot of blue in the winter sky, so that you felt as if something had been taken from you forever?"

Seeing that he had puzzled them, he laughed.

"I suppose not. Still... The horse which is not a horse..."

**T**o recall the momentous events of your life (he went on) is to pull up nettles with the flowers.

When I think of my uncle Prinsep I remember my mother first, and only then his watery blue eyes. When I think of him I can see the high brick walls of the lunatic asylum at Wergs, and I hear the echoing



shouts from the abandoned alms-houses round the Aqualate Pond.

I was not born in this trade. When I was a boy we lived in the broad ploughlands around Sour Bridge. We were well enough off at my father's death to have moved to the city, but my mother was content where she was. I suppose she relied on the society she knew; and on her brothers, who were numerous and for the most part lived close. I can see her now, giving tea to these red-faced yeomen in their gaiters and rusty coats who filled our drawing room like their own placid great farm horses, bringing with them whatever the season the whole feel of a November dawn — mist in the cut-and-laid hedges, rooks cawing from the tall elms, a huge sun rising behind the bare wet lace of hawthorn. She was a woman like a china ornament, always wary of their feet.

Uncle Prinsep was her step-brother, a very silent man who came to us for long visits without ever speaking. Many years before, after a quarrel with his own mother, he had let the family down and gone to live in Viriconium. I can see now how much my mother must have disapproved of his dress and manner (he wore a pale blue velvet suit and yellow shoes, much out of date in the city I suspect, but always a source of amazement to us); but despite this, and although she often pretended to despise the Prinsep clan as a whole, she was unfailingly kind to him. There he sat, at the tea-table, a man with a weak mouth and large skull upholstered with fat, who gave the impression of being constantly in a dream. He was filled, his silence informed us, with a melancholy beyond communication, or even comprehension, which sometimes stood in the corner of his eye like a tear. You could hear him sighing on the stairs in the morning after his bath. He patted himself dry with a soft towel.

The other uncles disliked him; my sisters regarded him with contempt, claiming that when they were younger he had tried to put his hands up the back of their pinafores; but to me he was a continual delight, because he was so often used as an example of what I would become if I didn't pay attention, and because he had once given me a book which began,

"I was in Viriconium once. I was a much younger woman then. What a place it is for lovers! The Locust Winter carpets its streets with broken insects; at the corners they sweep them into strange-smelling drifts which glow for the space of a morning like heaps of gold before they fade away..."

Imagine the glee with which I discovered that Uncle Prinsep had written this himself! I could not wait to fail my mother and go there.

One afternoon a little after the spring thaw, when I was eighteen or nineteen, he arrived unexpectedly and stood on the doorstep shaking his coat under a sky the colour of zinc. He seemed distracted; but at the tea table his tongue was loosened at last. He talked about his journey, the weather, his rooms in the city which he said were untenable through burst pipes and draughts; my mother couldn't stop him talking. If there was a silence he would suddenly say, "I was in mourning for six people last May," causing us to look at our plates in embarrassment; or, "Do you think that souls fly around and choose bodies

to be born into?" My sisters covered their mouths and spluttered, but I was mortified.

He couldn't hear enough, he said, about the family, and he interrogated my mother, who had by now begun to look down at her own plate in some confusion, mercilessly about each of the other uncles in turn. Did Dando Seferis still go fishing when he had the chance? How was — he snapped his fingers, he had forgotten her name — Pernel, his wife? How old would the daughter be this year? When he could pursue this no further he looked round and sighed happily. "What a wonderful cake this is!" he exclaimed; and, on being informed that it was a quite ordinary Kuchen: "I can't think why I've never eaten it before. Did we always have it? How nice it is to be home!" He nudged me, to my horror, and said, "You don't get cake like this in Viriconium, young man!"

Later he played the piano and sang.

He made my sisters dance with him; but only the old country dances. To see this great fat man, face shining with perspiration, shamble like a bear to the strains of 'The Earl of Rone' or 'The Hunting of the Jolly Wren' moved them to even greater contempt. He told us ghost stories before we went up to bed. He managed to corner me on the stairs after I had studiously avoided his gaze all evening, to give me a green country waistcoat with some money wrapped in tissue paper in one pocket; I sat in my room looking at it and wept with fury at his lack of understanding. After we were asleep he kept my mother up, talking about their father and his political ambitions, until the small hours.

We had him for two days, during which my mother watched him anxiously. Was he drunk? Was he ill? She could not decide. Whatever it was he went back to Viriconium on the morning of the third day, and died there a week later. In keeping with her evasive yet practical nature she told us nothing about the circumstances. "It happened in someone's house," she said with a movement of her shoulders which we recognised as both protective and censorious; and she would admit nothing more.

He was brought home to be buried. The funeral was as miserable as most winter occasions. Rain fell at intervals from a low, greyish-white sky, to bedraggle the artificial flowers on the cortege and the black plumes of the funeral horses. Some of the other uncles came and stood with their hats off by the grave, while rooks wheeled and cawed overhead in the rain as if they were part of the ceremony. The cemetery was frozen hard in places, already thawing in others; and the flat meadows beyond were under a single shining sheet of water, up out of which stuck a few black hedges and trees. My sisters wept because their dresses were soaked, and after all they had not meant to be horrible to anyone; my mother was quite white, and leaned heavily on my arm. I wore with defiance a pair of yellow shoes.

"Poor Prinsep!" said my mother, hugging us all on the way home. "He deserves your prayers." But it wasn't until much later that I learned the sad facts of his death or the sadder ones of his life.

By then I could be found in the pavement cafés of Sour Bridge, with a set of my own. We favoured the Red Hart Estaminet, not just for its cheap suppers and boldly-coloured 'art posters' but because it was the haunt of visiting painters, writers and music

hall artistes who had come from Viriconium to take the *Wasserkur* in sheds outside the town. When they weren't being hosed down with ice-cold water for their bowel disorders and gonorrhoeas, I suppose, it amused them to make fun of our scrubbed young faces, provincial romances, and ill-fitting suits.

It was at the Red Hart that I first met Madame de Maupassant, the famous contralto, by then a creature bent and diminished by some disease of the throat, with a voice so ravaged it was painful and frightening at the same moment to hear her speak. I could not imagine her on the stage — I didn't know then that to maintain her popularity in the city she still sang with deadly effort every night at the Prospekt Theatre. I thought of her as a menacing but rather vapid old woman obsessed with certain colours, who would lean over the table and say confidentially, "When I was in church as a girl I observed that flies would not pass through the lilac rays from a stained glass window. Again, it would appear that all internal parasites die if exposed to the various shades of lavender; the doctor is disposed to try a similar remedy in my case." Or: "An honest man will admit that his most thrilling dreams are accompanied by a violet haze...Do you know the dreams I mean?"

I did.

One day she said, to my surprise, "So you're Balandine Prinsep's nephew. I knew him quite well, but he never spoke of a family. Don't you follow in his footsteps: all those years at a woman's feet, and never more than a smile! There's a patient man for you."

And she gave her characteristic croak of a laugh.

"I don't understand," I said. "What woman?"

Which made Madame de Maupassant laugh all the more. Eventually, I suppose, I persuaded her to tell me what my mother had kept from us; what Viriconium had always known.

"When your uncle came to the city," she said, "twenty years ago, he found the dancer Vera Ghillera at the height of her success, appearing twice nightly at the Prospekt in a ballet called 'The little hump-backed horse' choreographed for her by Cheveigne.

"After every performance she held court in a dressing room done out with reds and golds like a stick of sealing wax. There was a tiger skin rug on the floor. You never saw such dim yellow lamps, brass trays, and three-legged tables decorated with every vulgar little onyx box you could mention! Here they all came to invite her to supper, and she made them sit on the tiger skin and talk about art or politics instead: Paulinus Rack the impresario, ailing and thin now, like a white ghost; Caranthides whose poems had been printed that year for the first time in a volume called 'Yellow clouds' and whose success was hardly less spectacular than her own; even Ashlyme the portrait painter came, stared at her face with a kind of irritable wonder, and went away again — his marriage to Audsley King put an end to anything like that before it could begin.

"Your uncle knew nothing about the ballet then. He saw the ballerina by chance one day, as he was looking out of his window into the street.

"He was young and lonely. He had taken rooms near the asylum at Wergs, where she went in secret once a month, wrapped in a dove grey cloak. He soon became her most ardent admirer, waiting on the stairs

outside the dressing room door, fourteen white lilies under his arm in green tissue paper. Eventually she received him, and allotted him a favoured seat on one of the gilt paws of the tiger. He could be seen any night after that (though what he did in the day remained a mystery), staring up at her with a melancholy expression, taking no part in the conversation of the great men around him. She never gave him any further encouragement; she had her own affairs. Eventually he died in her presence, as uselessly as he had lived — much older then, of course."

I was profoundly shocked by this, and stung, though I tried not to show it. "Perhaps the arrangement suited him," I said bravely, trying to invest the word 'arrangement' with a significance it plainly did not have; and when the famous contralto had received this with the blank stare it deserved: "Anyway, he wrote a book about the city, 'The constant imago'. He gave me a copy of it." I raised my voice and looked round at my friends. "It is my opinion that he was a great artist, genuinely in love with art."

Madame de Maupassant shrugged.

"I know nothing about books," she said with a sigh.

"But it was your uncle's idea of conversation to sidle into a room along the wall like a servant, and when recognised say in a querulous voice, like this, 'I have never found it necessary to have such a high opinion of God...' Then he would regard his audience with that watery, fish-like stare he had, having struck them dumb with incomprehension. He was the most futile man I ever knew."

I never saw her again. She soon grew tired of her cure and went back to Viriconium, but I couldn't forget this final judgement of my uncle. If I thought of him at all after that it was with a kind of puzzled sympathy — I saw him walking at night with his head bowed, along the rainy streets near the asylum, two or three sentences of his book his only company, with the shouts of the lunatics coming to his ears like the cries of distant exotic animals; or looking dully out of his window into the orange glare of the lamps, hoping that the ballerina would pass — although he knew it was the wrong time of the month. I remembered the provincial waistcoat he had given me; somehow that completed my disappointment. Then another winter closed the pavement cafes in Sour Bridge and I forgot the author of 'The constant imago' until the death of my mother some years later.

My mother loved cut flowers, especially those she had grown herself, and often kept them long after they were withered and brown because, she said, they had given her so much pleasure. When I think of her now she is always in a room full of flowers, watering them from a blue and white jug. All through her last illness she fought the nurse over a vase of great white marguerite daisies. The nurse said she would rather be dismissed than allow them to remain by the bed at night; it was unhealthy. My mother promptly dismissed her. When I went into the long, quiet room one afternoon to remonstrate with her over this, I found her prepared.

"We must get rid of that woman," she said darkly. "She's trying to poison me!" And then, coolly anticipating the nurse's own arguments: "You know I can't get my breath without a few flowers near me."

She knew she was wrong. She stared with a kind of musing delight at the daisies; and at me. Then she sighed suddenly.

"Your Uncle Prinsep was a silly, weak man." She clutched my arm. "Promise me you'll have your own home, and not live like that on the verge of someone else's life."

I promised.

"It was his mother's fault," she went on in a more practical voice. "She was a woman of powerful character. And then, you see, they lived in that huge house at the back of nowhere. She attacked the servants physically if they didn't bow to her; she had her porridge brought to her every morning from a village ten miles away, because there it was made more nearly to her taste. This behaviour drove her daughters to madness and her sons out of the house, one by one. Prinsep was the youngest, and the last to go — he was painstaking in his efforts to placate her, but in the end even he found it easier not to remain."

She sighed again.

"I always had a horror that I would do the same to my own children."

Before I went to take her apologies to the nurse, she said, "You had better have this. It is the key to your Uncle Prinsep's rooms. You are old enough to live in Viriconium now; and if you must, you must." She held my wrist and put the key in the palm of my hand, a little brass thing, not very shiny. "One day when you were young," she said, "the wind broke the stems of the hollyhocks. They lay across the wall with all their beautiful flowers intact. While they could be of use like that the insects still flew in and out of them busily; I thought it a shame."

She hung on all that summer in the cool room, making our lives painful but unable to relax and let us go. During that time I often looked at the key she had given me. But I didn't use it until she died in the autumn: I was sure she wouldn't have wanted to know that I had gone to the city and turned it in its lock.

It turned easily enough after so many years, and I stood there confused for a moment on the threshold of Uncle Prinsep's life and my own, not daring to go in. I had lost my way by the Aqualate Pond with its curious echoes and fogs; like most people who come there I had not until then realised the extent of Viriconium, or its emptiness. But the rooms, when at last I went into them, were ordinary enough — bare grey boards with feathers of dust, a few books on the shelves, a few pictures on the whitewashed walls. In the little kitchen there was a cupboard, with some things for making tea. I was tired. There was another room, but I left it unopened and dropped my belongings on the iron bed, my boxes and cases wet with salt from the passage of the Yser.

Underneath the bed with the pot for nightsoil I found two or three copies of 'The constant imago'.

"I was in Viriconium once. I was a much younger woman then. What a place that is for lovers! The Locust Winter carpets its streets with broken insects; at the corners they sweep them into strange-smelling drifts which glow for the space of a morning like heaps of gold before they fade away...."

After I have looked in the other room, I thought, and



found somewhere to put my things, I will go to sleep, and perhaps wake up happier in the morning. After all I am here now. So I put the book aside and turned the key again in the lock.

When he first fell in love with Vera Ghillera, my uncle had had the walls of this room painted a dull, heavy sealing-wax red; at the window there were thick velvet curtains of the same colour, pulled shut. Pictures of the ballerina were everywhere — on the walls, the tables, the mantelpiece — posing in costumes she had worn for 'La chatte', 'The fire last Wednesday at Lowth', and 'The little hump-backed horse' — painted with her little chin on her hand, looking over a railing at the sea, smiling mysteriously from under a hat. The woman herself, or her effigy made in a kind of yellow wax, lay on a catafalque in the centre of the room, her strange, compact dancer's body naked, the legs parted in sexual invitation, the arms raised imploringly, her head replaced by the striped and polished brown skull of a horse.

In this room my Uncle Prinsep had hidden himself — from me, from my mother, from Madame de Mau-passant and her set; and finally from Vera Ghillera the dancer herself, at whose feet he had sat all those years. I closed the door and went to the window. When I pulled back the curtains and looked out I could see the brick walls of the asylum, tall, and finished with spikes, washed in the orange glow of the lamp-light; and hear the distant, ferocious cries of the madmen behind them.

**I**t was dawn. The Mari-dancers were long gone, off to Shifnal with their horse; and light was creeping down Henrietta Street like spilled milk between the cobbles. The sin-eater coughed and cleared his throat, yawned.

His energy had left him in the night, draining his eyes to a chalky blue colour, the colour of a butterfly on the cliffs above the sea. He let his hands fall slackly in his lap and looked at the old man, who was asleep by the hearth with his mouth open. He looked at the surviving daughter, staring intently at the table then scratching patterns on it with a spoon, tongue in the corner of her mouth. He noticed the old man's wife — laying the new fire in the grate, filling the kettle with water, making ready for the great meal of fish and potatoes which would be eaten later in the day — listening serenely to him as she went about the work, as if this were a story, not the bitter facts of his existence.

"I left Viriconium after that," he told her, "for the deserts in the north; and I never went back there." He moved his shoulders suddenly, irritated perhaps because he could no longer make these events clear enough to impress her, and he was impatient with himself for continuing to speak. "Do I miss it? No; nor Sour Bridge, with its dull farmers treading mud in the shuttered drawing rooms."

Frost, fog, the smell of the distant shore; dawn creeping down Henrietta Street like milk. He could hear the people raking up their fires, uncovering the mirrors and bird cages. They rubbed their hands briskly as they looked out at the morning. "If the wind changes later we shall have a fine day." At last they could shut the doors and get a bit of warmth! The little dead girl lay safely on the blue and white cover; it remained only for someone to eat the salt.

"One thing is odd, though," he said. "When I sat in my uncle's rooms and looked back over the decisions which had led me there, I saw clearly that at every turn they had been made by the dying and the dead; and I swore I would leave all that behind me."

He stared for a moment almost pleadingly at the woman.

"As you see, I have not."

She smiled: her child was safe; its soul was secure; she was content.

"That was where I first ate the salt," he said bleakly. "It lay on your breast as surely as it lies now on your dead daughter's. I don't know why my uncle put it there for me to find."

**L**ater in the morning a wind from the land got up and blew light dashes of rain across the windows, but they were soon gone, and it was a fine day. Full of potatoes and fish, tired perhaps but comfortably settled in the stomach, the sin-eater picked up his bag and swung it over his shoulder. He had taken his money and put it in his pocket. Behind him at the trestle tables in the street he could hear laughter, the clatter of plates, the beginnings of music. He breathed deeply, shrugged, made a gesture with his hands, all at once, as if to convey to himself his own sense of freedom.

He was not after all that boy from Sour Bridge; or his Uncle Prinsep. A stocky, energetic man of middle height, he whistled off down Henrietta Street, ready to walk as far as he could. He looked inland, at the hills

looming through squalls of rain. Soon he would climb up among them and let the wind blow those clean childish little sins out of him and away.

**M. John Harrison** makes his second appearance in *Interzone* with the above story, an addition to his sequence of tales about Viriconium. He lives in Yorkshire and spends much of his time rock climbing.

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## CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

We've decided to start a classified ads column, and offer you the following as an opener. If you have anything you wish to advertise to our readership (3,000+) please send your copy, *together with payment*, to the main editorial address. Rates: 20 pence a word, minimum of ten words, discount of 10% for insertions repeated in three issues.

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## Submit your stories to Interzone

... but not unless you think they are worthy of publication in this magazine! We welcome submissions from unknown and little-known writers, and indeed we have already received many hundreds. Reading them takes a great deal of time, so we hope you will bear with us if you do not receive as rapid a response as you might like. All submissions will be read sympathetically, but it will be helpful if you bear in mind the following points:

1. Read the magazine before you submit anything to us. Judge the standard of the material we are already publishing, and see if you can do as well — or better.
2. All stories should be typed, on one side of the paper only, preferably on white A4 paper, and must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of good size.
3. Please type your name and address, and the word-length of the story, on the top sheet of the manuscript. Small covering letters can easily get mislaid, and they're unnecessary in any case.
4. The preferred length is 2,000-7,000 words. We rarely publish stories over 8,000 words in length, and the few long ones we do accept have to be outstandingly good to justify their length.
5. Please submit stories *one at a time*. We've been surprised at the number of people who send us batches of three or four. These should be no need for this: simply select your best story and let us see it.

Bear in mind that *Interzone* is edited and published by an unpaid collective. We are doing what we are doing for the love of it — and because we feel there is a real need for a magazine market to encourage good short-story writing in the areas of science fiction and fantasy. We pay for the fiction we publish, but all payments have to come from the proceeds of the magazine as we have no hidden source of finance. We hope, therefore, that all aspiring writers will do what they can to support *Interzone* — by taking out a subscription, by persuading friends to subscribe, and by pestering bookshops which do not currently stock the magazine. Make *Interzone* known as best you can. If we fail to sell enough copies, there is no hope of us buying any of your stories in the future!



# IN REVIEW

**The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction** by Colin Greenland (Routledge, £11.95).

The title describes the book to a point. *The Entropy Exhibition* is Colin Greenland's try at converting a doctoral thesis into something that makes sense to people, and generally speaking he's pretty successful at opening up his text to the human world. But there does remain a narrowness of reference that at times dangerously undermines some of the arguments put forward, about the relationship between American sf of the 1950s and subsequent British sf for instance, or about the nature of the American New Wave movement. And because they are being quoted to illustrate a thesis, the treatment of writers like Langdon Jones is unnecessarily savage — Greenland spends a good amount of time excoriating "I Remember, Anita", Jones's first story and one he seems to have thought so little of he excluded it from *The Eye of the Lens*, his sole collection to date.

But Greenland does a good job with his three main subjects, Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard and Brian Aldiss, even though all three are alive and active, and all of them are psychically litigious, the way most genuinely productive makers are, and extremely jealous of their own storylines. *New Worlds* in the 60s being a minefield of conflicting — though by now rather distant — stories, Greenland does tread rather softly across eggshells in telling the tale of the various intersections that created and kind of sustained the magazine, so that his history is necessarily potted and decorous. At the same time it is copiously and cogently literate, and does much to expose the web of connections between the creators of *New Worlds* and the larger 60s biosphere, where we dwell, all of us, coming to terms or failing to come to terms with our intimations of personal and cultural slide. But, O, the colours, Lucy.

There is a natural tendency on Greenland's part, given the sort of literary history he is trying to create, to hypostatize the magazine that is his linking concern into one of the narrative agents of his text, so that it becomes, in this book, far more numinously an entity than ever it seemed to its potpourri of collaborators and creators. In the text of the real world of the 1960s, *New Worlds* performed no syntagmatic legerdemain (though one is sure there were prayers for a magical afflatus or raft) — except maybe in the nightmares of Mr Moorcock, who was going broke because of it. But hypostatizing of this sort may be impossible to avoid. That aside, *The Entropy Exhibition* can be praised and faulted like the seminal job of work it is, a quarry to be mined and exported by, among others, one suspects, Mr Greenland himself. (JC)

**The Golden Age of Science Fiction** ed. Kingsley Amis (Penguin, £2.95)

The year is 1959. A progressive young critic writes a book called *New Maps of Hell*, in which he has the temerity to treat his favourite reading matter, science fiction, as if it were real literature. Imagine his chagrin when he finds himself transported through time to the year 1983, only to find that everything those old pulp masters imagined has now come true! The reluctant traveller stubbornly refuses to admit that twenty-four years have passed, with hilarious effect. Modern readers will have to suppress a smile when he maintains that Thomas Disch is "a writer of real though unorganized talent", but the comedy is tinged with sadness too: it's hard not to pity him in his delusion that Arthur Clarke "has survived all right". By turns farcical and genuinely pathetic, this nostalgic yarn should win Amis a place in the hearts of sci-fi buffs everywhere. (CG)

**Chekhov's Journey** by Ian Watson (Gollancz, £7.95)

Crammed to the last page with doppelganging protagonists and their lovers and chums, and dense with more plotwork than a sibyl could assort because it's a *plus ça change* time-storm novel and they are never simple, but at the same oddly exiguous because its author seems to have been in rather too much of a rush to bother animating or differentiating his dozens of characters in the three eras and two alternating universes they inhabit, *Chekhov's Journey*, though by no means Ian Watson's most achieved work, does mark an ongoing change of tone and pace in the career of the best of the 1970s batch of British sf writers. It is his thirteenth book. Anton Chekhov makes the journey we in this universe know the real Chekhov made 90 years ago to Siberia, and which (in this universe) occasioned his greatest work. But, 100 years after Watson's 1890, a Russian theatrical group has engaged Dr Kirilenko to entrance the left hemisphere of the brain of an actor about to play the Chekhov of 1890 and to cause him to inhabit imaginatively that "actual" "Chekhov" but things get complicated, what with the time-storm launched by a Russian time-travelling starship of the future captained by a Chekhov lookalike, and the theatrical group's confusion (and eventual panic) at the implications gradually evident in their actor's recording of his Chekhov's journey to the site of the Tunguska explosion which in our universe only occurred twenty years later, and with the starship's going out of control and crashing back in 1908 or 1890 or both alternatively at Tunguska, and with certain other developments and asides, the novel careens to a sudden halt. The plot is a *jeu d'esprit*; the characters are *papier-mâché* but bloody sprightly; the whole farrago is *ongepotshet* but with a widening grin on the face of Watson. (JC)

**The Affirmation** by Christopher Priest (Arena, £2.50)

His life disrupted by a series of personal calamities, Peter Sinclair flees the city and takes refuge in a desolate cottage in Herefordshire. He has lost, all at once, his father, lover, his job and his flat, and consequently any feeling of purpose or direction. Taking stock, he starts to marshal his memories on paper but like so many other writers, from Joyce to Lessing, discovers that fiction makes more sense of his life than autobiography ever could. The result is a novel about a Peter Sinclair who lives in Faaland, north of the Dream Archipelago, and writes his own fictitious memoir, in which he is a native of an imaginary country called England... *The Affirmation*, indisputably Priest's finest book, plays ceaselessly with the very idea of fiction, yet without becoming merely self-referential. Sinclair makes things up — but is that any different from what we all do anyway, investing places with our own private emotions, conjecturing characters and motives from the slenderest of circumstantial evidence? As the world of his fantasy becomes indelibly superimposed on the world around him, it is clear that Sinclair is sliding into madness, but at the same time he and his author are cutting away at our most basic assumptions, revealing how flimsy and ambiguous is the state we call sanity. Priest's theme is a common one in this age of dissolving certainties, but never has it been treated with such compelling grace. (CG)

**The Wandering Unicorn** by Manuel Mujica Lainez (Chatto, £4.50)

There is no actual unicorn in this story, though the narrator did see one once. The title refers to the lance of unicorn horn inherited by the hero, Aiol, which accompanies him on his travels and eventually to the Siege of Jerusalem. This is the end of the twelfth century, an epoch when at any moment "you might bump into a dragon, giant, unicorn, or angel, might be presented with a griffin's claw or asked to buy a piece of bread chewed by our Saviour and imported, with its wax seal of authenticity, from Tiberias". That this catalogue shifts from the mythical to the plainly fraudulent is slyly characteristic of a book securely set in a milieu where the wildly fantastic and the grimly actual were thought of as equivalent and even indistinguishable. Lainez reproduces that uncertain world cleverly, through a narrator who is herself "mediaeval through and through": an immortal,

invisible, incorporeal, half-serpentine fairy princess called Melusine. Improbable or not, Melusine has an academic's passion for accuracy. When you've lived for a thousand years or so there's little point in making things up, even to disguise the follies of your youth. Melusine tells how she fell in love at first sight and followed Aiol for the rest of his life, unrequited because how was he to know she was there? Thus Lainez gives us the Middle Ages complete, from the innyards of Poitiers to the Battle of Montgisard — art, commerce, politics, valour and vice, all elegantly dictated and rippling between grave sentiment and ironic good humour. His fairy story, written in 1965 and now impeccably translated by Mary Fitton, has magic castles, enchanted forests, knights in armour, amulets, transfiguration scenes, prophecies fulfilled, and even "the regulation holy hermit". On the other hand, it is no more like a conventional fairy story than John Crowley's *Little, Big*: like that book too it has a shrewd sense of its historical period, which is in some ways quite alien and in others perfectly familiar. (CG)

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